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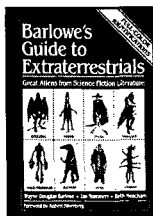
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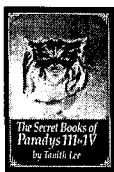
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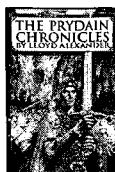
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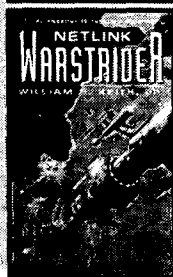
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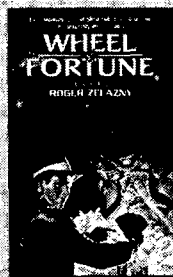
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Environmentalists and people who wear "Save the Planet" T-shirts and those who worry about what they call "the ecology" can rejoice. Another precious and endangered species of life on our planet has been rescued from the brink of extinction, at least for awhile.

The great auk? The quagga? The moa? No, sorry—they're all irretrievably gone. I'm talking about the smallpox virus. What once was a vital, passionate part of the Earth's immense population of living things had been reduced to a tiny semblance of its former self, a few hapless captives sealed in laboratory flasks; and even those last remaining valiant survivors were about to be handed over to the executioners. But no! A reprieve has been ordered! These tiny, frail organisms will not be wiped out after all—not immediately, anyway.

Does all this sound crazy to you? Do you think I'm whipping up some sort of black-humor spoof? Actually, I'm not. This is a true story. And it leads us into consideration of some very tricky philosophical issues.

Smallpox is, of course, a nasty disease. Over the course of human history (and prehistory) the barely visible smallpox virus condemned millions of people to death or, at

best, to horrible disfigurement. It altered the destiny of nations and undermined entire civilizations. Humanity fought back, though, containing and then destroying the disease in most Western nations over a period of two hundred years by means of vaccination. The climax of the war against smallpox got under way in 1966 when a team of World Health Organization medics equipped with smallpox vaccine and special jet injectors set out through the remaining smallpox-infested territories of the Third World to find and immunize all those still at risk of infection. Hundreds of millions of people in South America, Asia, Indonesia, and Africa were vaccinated, essentially ridding the world of the disease. There has not been a naturally occurring case of smallpox on this planet since October 1977, when one was detected in Somalia. Very likely there will never be one again anywhere.

The disease was officially proclaimed eradicated by the World Health Organization in 1980; but the smallpox virus itself still survives, in deep-freeze storage vials kept under tight security at the Center for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta and at the Research Institute for Viral Preparation in Moscow. These samples

were set aside so that their molecular structure could be mapped and studied, a job that was completed a few years ago. Then, according to the W.H.O.'s plan, the last smallpox viruses were to be ritually destroyed in informal ceremonies in Russia and the United States at midnight on December 31, 1993, by heating the flasks to a temperature of 248 degrees Fahrenheit for forty-five minutes.

All well and good, except, perhaps, for diehard Sierra Club members and Friends of the Earth who find the extinction of any species—even this one—abhorrent. But during the course of the genetic mapping of the virus, scientists stumbled on a less sentimental reason for keeping the smallpox bugs alive. The mappers discovered startling links between the smallpox virus and certain natural substances that permit the virus to bypass the human body's defenses. Such lofty scientific figures as Dr. Bernard Fields of Harvard and Dr. Joshua Lederberg of Rockefeller University argued that it might be possible to learn a great deal about the human immune system from studying the smallpox virus, knowledge that could be put to use in dealing with more esoteric diseases now beginning to ravage Third World nations. The possibility even existed that data derived from research done with smallpox could be applied to the treatment of cancer and AIDS. Furthermore, new antiviral drugs are being developed all the time, but it would be impossible to test their efficacy against

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smallpox without the availability of live viruses on which they could be tried under laboratory conditions.

And so Drs. Fields and Lederberg, and others, spoke out against the scheduled ceremonial immolation of the last stocks of smallpox virus. Extinction, after all, is forever: they called for further research before the axe was allowed to fall. The W.H.O. responded with a one-year reprieve; then, in September 1994, it postponed the execution date again, to June 30, 1995; and a few months later, as further clemency appeals came in, the governing board of the W.H.O. canceled that date as well, remanding the entire issue to indefinite consideration and discussion. The debate may go on for several more years: the virus is safe for now.

But why, if these carefully secured samples of this deadly killer hold the promise of great value in scientific research, are advocates of destroying them still pressing the case for total extinction? There's nothing to lose, and possibly a great deal to gain, in keeping these last few flasks of viruses alive, right?

Wrong, says Otar Andzhaparidze, the director of the Moscow lab where half the virus supply is stored. "Kill it," he says. He raises the spectre that the viruses may be stolen by terrorists or blackmailers or lunatics. His institute keeps the virus in ordinary kitchen freezers behind glass doors equipped with alarms that will ring in a nearby police station if someone attempts

a break-in. But what if the police don't come? he asks. What if they come too late? The night of the October 1993 rebellion against the Yeltsin government, Andzhaparidze had to hire private security guards to watch over the lab.

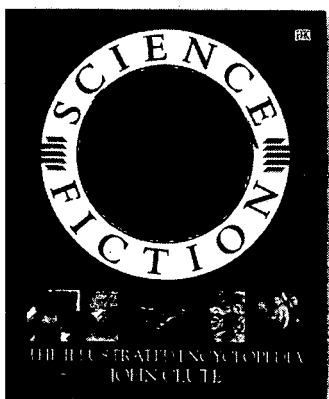
"The atmosphere was alarming," he told a *New York Times* reporter. "But everything worked out. We've been keeping the virus for about thirty years and so far God has spared us." Best to get rid of the stuff altogether, this scientist believes. "No one has asked the populations of the world whether they want the sword of Damocles held over their head."

Scientists on the other side maintain that terrorists would have a hard time turning the frozen viruses into an effective biological weapon, and in any case that lab security could always be beefed up. One solution might be simply to get the virus flasks out of unstable Russia; the ones in Atlanta are kept in sealed vaults and gaining access to them is very difficult indeed. Still, strange things do happen even where security is supposedly air-tight, as can be amply documented through the long history of espionage. The possibility of an accidental infection has also been raised. It's hard to see how viruses kept locked in a sealed freezer can infect anybody, but the viruses won't necessarily stay in those freezers if they are to be studied, and then the situation would be quite different. You will note that I spoke of the 1977 Somali smallpox case as the last

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"naturally occurring" one. There was, in fact, one later outbreak—in 1978, at a laboratory in Birmingham, England, where smallpox research was going on. Although precautions supposedly were being taken to contain the viruses properly, a medical photographer named Janet Parker, who was working one floor above the lab, somehow came down with the disease and died of it—the world's last known smallpox victim. (The director of the laboratory committed suicide.)

What to do, what to do?

Destroy the remaining stocks of smallpox viruses and provide the world with an absolute guarantee that this dread disease will never return, or keep the bugs alive, under close guard, for the use of medical researchers?

I find myself on the side of the plucky little virus, here. Let the Russians boil their flasks, maybe, if they aren't confident of their own security arrangements; but our own stocks should be kept alive—guarded in the most careful way—so that their secrets can be explored. We don't know what information this diabolical germ can yield to the researchers of today or tomorrow or the day after tomorrow, but it's absolutely certain that nothing at all will be learned from it if it doesn't exist any more. As for the risk of an accidental escape of the virus, or

even of some hellish exploitation of it in biological warfare, I say that that's a risk worth taking. We did, remember, wipe out smallpox once already. We can surely do it again if we have to.

As for my remark in the first paragraph about "those who worry about what they call 'the ecology,'" it has to do with my annoyance as a linguistic purist over the recent corruption of that word to make it synonymous with "the planetary environment." My dictionary defines ecology as "a branch of science concerned with the inter-relationship of organisms and their environments." It isn't the place where we live; it's the study of that place, and especially of the web of life that binds all creatures together.

The smallpox virus is part of that web. For better or for worse, it has played a role in the growth of the human population—serving as a regulator, if you will. Now it is at the edge of extinction; its fate is in our hands.

It's a legitimate part of the ecological web, no question about that. But does it deserve to continue to live? Or should we finish the job of wiping it out, as we have done with so many other life-forms that we find inconvenient? What do you think, you partisans of "the ecology"?

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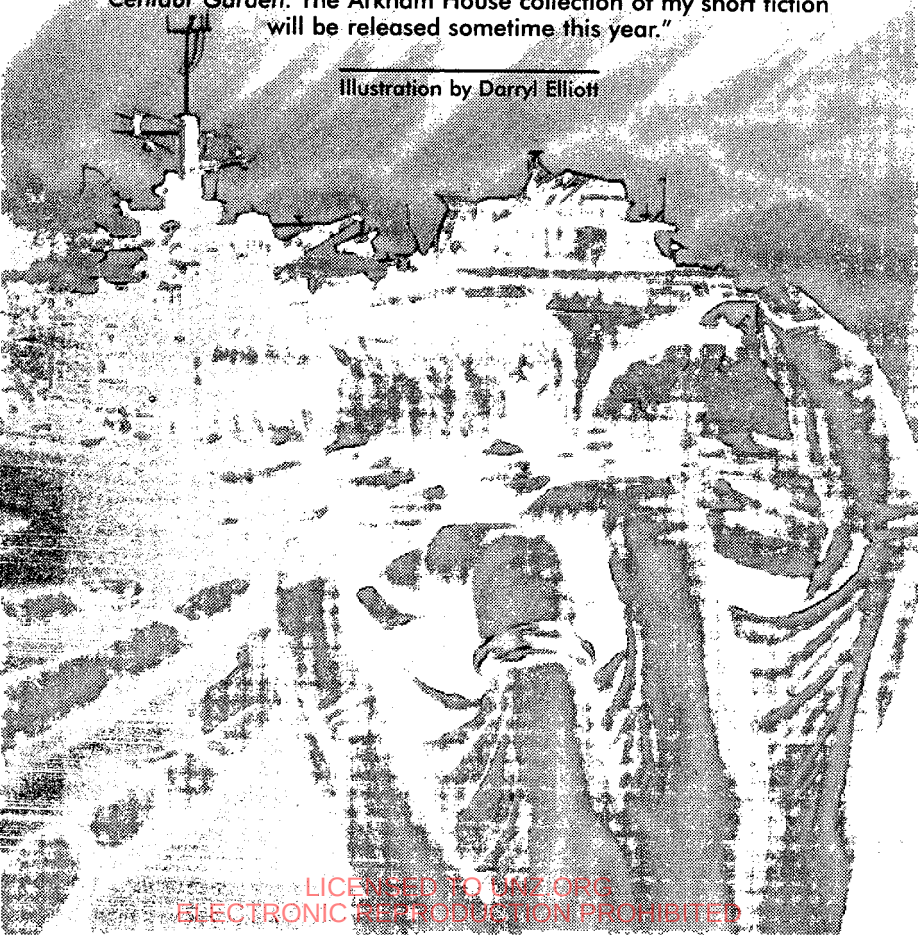
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Mary Rosenblum

THE DORYMAN

The author tells us, "I am deeply indebted to fellow writer Mike Moscoe for the technical details of my ex-aircraft carrier. 'The Doryman' is set in the future of my *Selkies* universe, but it is certainly not the only future I foresee. I may explore the others, later. *Selkies* has been sold to Del Rey, and I have just finished *Travesty*, a book that includes the characters from the upcoming novel, *Centaur Garden*. The Arkham House collection of my short fiction will be released sometime this year."

Illustration by Darryl Elliott



Darin slipped, halfway to the hoist. He lost his grip on the foot-square chunk of steel bulkhead he was carrying and went down on top of it, face first into the freezing, scummy water that sloshed around in *The Fancy's* belly. Soaked, sputtering, he scrambled to his feet, struggling with the still-warm steel. Shivering, he looked around, but here in the flickering shadows cast by the white glare of the cutting torches, he was almost invisible. Nobody had noticed.

He gritted his teeth and sloshed the rest of the way to the hoist. He managed to lever the steel onto the stack already on the hoist bed, then straightened, panting. Wiping wet black hair out of his eyes, he swept the dim space with one quick glance. This was an extra shift—punishment for mouthing off to the super, Scully. Scully wasn't much older than Darin. His father worked the processing line, grinding up the surimi fish species brought in by the dories. So Scully wasn't going to inherit a dory any more than Darin was. About the best he could hope for was to get promoted to super on one of the higher-end processing lines. Or maybe run a taco stand, or VR parlor, if he could save enough to lease the extra space from *The Fancy*.

Nobody was looking his way. Darin hunched his shoulders and made for the passageway, hoping that the hoist and its load of steel hid him. No yell from Scully. He slipped into the passageway and headed for the forward portside ladder, straightening his wet clothes as he went, merging with the kids and adults climbing from the Mess deck entertainment area up to the Fungus, topside. With the twelve thousand or so residents on *The Fancy*, you could find a crowd to lose yourself in just about any time of day. Darin was good at it.

His clothes clung to him, clammy and irritating as he climbed. At least they were fishing warm waters this time of year and not the Arctic. He climbed past 03 Deck—the Gallery Deck. That was where the dorymen lived with their families. You didn't go there unless you were invited. He eyed the hatch, wondering if any of the steel they were mining from the old torpedo bulkheads would go into a new dory. Probably not. There was only so much steel on *The Fancy* and it cost too much to buy from the drylanders. You inherited your dory, if you were born lucky. Or you busted your butt on the simulators and won a job piloting a collie for one of the dorymen. Then you could maybe earn enough in bonuses that you could maybe afford the steel for your own dory one day. If there was any steel left to buy, by then. The dorymen didn't really have any more future than anyone else marooned on this nuclear-powered island, Darin thought bitterly. But at least they got out into the sea. Which was a sort of freedom. And they lived on the Gallery, which was a sort of privacy. Almost.

Darin reached 04, the Flight Deck, and exited into the lowest level of the Fungus. The passageways were narrower up here, haphazard, with unexpected branches and corners that had just sort of happened as peo-

ple added new cabins and compartments onto the existing ones. The low ceiling made Darin want to duck his head, and it was nearly as dim up here as it had been below in the bilge. He pushed through the steel hatch at the end of the passageway, crowding a couple of tired looking women coming off-shift. Sunlight made him blink and he sucked in a clean breath of sea air. The ladder to the upper decks of the Fungus was outside, and he hung onto the handrail as he clomped up the open-mesh steps. The water was a long way down.

The two women were climbing slowly, talking about music and dinner. Darin squeezed past them, earned a twin glower that he ignored, then sprinted upward. Topside—06 deck—was where the gardens were. Breathing fast, he swung himself up the last steps and out into the narrow aisle between the rusting frames of the raised beds. The smell of the shit the gardeners used for fertilizer tinted the sea wind, and bean leaves rustled from their vertical supports as he raced between the beds. Taller than he could reach, they fenced out the cooling breeze. It *really* stank in here, and Darin breathed through his mouth as he headed forward.

Once upon a time, this had been a warship. Back before fish mattered more than war. Planes had landed on the Flight Deck, and there had been no Fungus. The deck stairstepped up two feet and he leaped up onto an older section of cabins. They had been built with higher ceilings, back when there were still plenty of extra bulkheads and not as many people. Below him, people would be eating dinner or watching vids or arguing. A woman weeding corn glanced at him with mild surprise as he hurried by. The tiny park—with its flower beds and open paths for strolling—was aft, sheltered from the wind. Nobody except the gardeners hung out up here.

Up ahead, a gray steel tool locker had been built close to the scupper on the port side. He ducked around to the seaward corner and edged out into the scupper. The gritty paint gave him good footing as he worked his way along it to his usual perch. Back against the locker, feet dangling, he let the brisk wind comb his damp hair, goosebumps rising on his skin. The view was worth the chill. Up here, fifty meters above the water, the horizon was more than ten kilometers away. Just below, the bulge of the Weapons One sponson jutted out slightly from the cliffwall of the ship. Once upon a time there had been guns down there. Now the small deck space was empty. It opened from the Gallery Deck, but he rarely saw anyone out there. Too windy.

Darin shaded his eyes, searching the sparkling blue sea off the port bow, watching for a gleam of white amid the glint of the wave-crests. Yes! He leaned forward precariously, riding *The Fancy's* ponderous surge as she plowed through the waves.

A white dolphin surfed *The Fancy's* bow wave.

Changed cousins of the gray dolphins that sometimes played there, the

white dolphins were . . . strange. There were rumors that some of them looked . . . almost human. The sea was full of mutations—the Giant corals that had clogged San Francisco Bay in less than a year, two-mouthed oysters, fish that didn't appear anywhere in the database of licensed species.

Beads of spray stung his face as Darin leaned outward, clinging one-handed. The dolphin was a big one, from the look of it. It veered suddenly and rose up out of the water as if . . . as if it knew he was watching. As if it was staring back at him. Breathless, Darin squinted, but the reflected sun dazzled his eyes and he couldn't tell. It was a long way down—the dolphin couldn't really see him.

He *felt* as if it was looking at him.

"You don't usually see them in the daytime."

The strange voice startled him and he almost lost his balance. Scrambling back into the safety of the scupper, clumsy and embarrassed, Darin glowered at the intruder. And swallowed his angry words as he found himself staring up at a grinning, dark-skinned man. He was a doryman. Darin's eyes widened slightly. One of the best on *The Fancy*—he'd set the record for the freshmarket catch, last year. Brandt. That was his name. "Do you ever see them up close? The white dolphins?" The words tumbled out before he could stop them and he blushed, because he sounded like such a *kid*.

But the doryman was nodding. "Sometimes," he said.

"I'd like to see one up close," Darin said softly.

"Why?" The doryman's eyes were on his face.

"Because . . ." Darin hesitated. "They're free, I think. More than us anyway. They've got some kind of future."

"And we don't?" The doryman's sea-colored eyes pinned him, startlingly bright in his dark face.

Darin struggled for words, unable to lie to those demanding eyes. "No." He swallowed. "We don't. All we can do is move steel around from here to there. We're running on the last two reactors. What happens when they quit?"

"How old are you?" the doryman asked softly.

"Fourteen." Darin lifted his chin. "Almost fifteen."

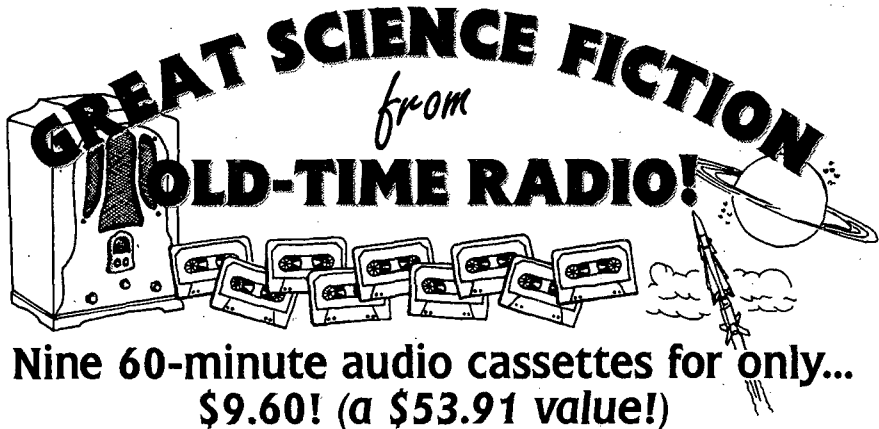
The doryman looked at the tool locker and nodded. "I used to come up here when I was fourteen. To get away." He nodded again, his face still revealing nothing. "I'll see you around." Then he lifted his hand and strolled forward.

See you around? Darin looked out to sea again, a lumpy feeling in his chest. Dorymen didn't associate with bilge-miners and gut-line grunts. The sea was an empty plain of blue water. The dolphin had vanished.

"Hey, shithead."

Uh oh. Darin started to bolt but it was too late.

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"Gotcha!" Scully's hand closed on the back of his neck and he spun Darin around, shoved him back hard against the locker. "Nobody cuts my shift." He raised a clenched fist. "You need a lesson about team spirit, bilge-scum."

"I don't cut regular shifts. I'm only working this one because you wanted to give me shit." Darin glared up at Scully, blood from his bitten tongue like the taste of the sea in his mouth. "What are you going to be when you grow up, Scully? I'm gonna be working a line. Maybe you'll be the super, but you'll be on the line, too."

Scully's face went pale and he raised a fist. Darin braced himself for the blow, but Scully merely made a disgusted noise in his throat. "I don't have to dirty my hands with you, bilge-scum." He lowered his fist. "I'm putting you on report for assaulting me. The Board can deal with you." His lip curled. "Go ahead and call me a liar. See who they believe. Maybe this time they'll realize what a waste of time you are and toss your butt onshore where it belongs. Or throw you over the side for your precious white dolphins to fuck."

Darin flushed. "You may be super, but you're the super of a bilge-scum shift."

"Get back to work." Scully shoved both fists into his pockets and turned on his heel. "Or don't. See if I care."

Darin watched him stride quickly away. For a moment he had seen hatred in Scully's eyes. Because they shared the same limited future. He wasn't sure why that bothered Scully so much. Darin had the sudden sense that someone was watching him. He glanced over his shoulder and saw the doryman Brandt lounging against the rail, looking his way. Darin hunched his shoulders and walked quickly aft, back toward the portside ladder. It shouldn't matter that the doryman had seen that encounter with Scully. It *didn't* matter. But somehow . . . it did.

The Board Room had paneled walls, unlike the bare steel bulkheads in the rest of the ship. The deck was carpeted, and *The Fancy's* Board sat with their backs to the big window in the forward wall, frowning at Darin from behind a long wooden table. "Your record is disappointing." Jeanne-Marie, the current Exec, frowned at him. She was descended from Basque fishermen, and had a sharp temper. "It implies that you lack a sense of community." She steepled her fingers on the table's polished surface and peered at Darin. "We exist only because we cooperate. There is no room on *The Fancy* for selfish and uninvolved individuals. You seem to be concerned with the welfare of no one except yourself."

"That's not true." Darin bit his lip because he hadn't meant to say anything. He'd learned long ago that trying to explain generally got you into more trouble than just keeping quiet and taking it.

"Why isn't it true?" Jeanne-Marie rapped out.

Darin looked away from her weathered and wrinkled face. "It's just . . . I mean . . . we're kidding ourselves." Up here, way forward on the Flight Deck, you could really feel the ship slamming through the waves. The energy of steel crashing into water shivered through his flesh, made him lift his chin and meet the Exec's unforgiving stare. "We keep doing the same stuff, and pretending it's gonna keep on like this forever. We don't get any bigger. We just get more crowded. What do we do when there's no more steel, or when the last reactor goes?"

"This is a highly balanced, totally functional community." Roskin, another Board member, leaned forward impatiently. "We have functioned for quite a bit longer than you have existed, young man. We will continue to function quite well after you are gone."

"We're not going anywhere." Darin bit his lip, because it wasn't working any better than he'd expected. "Never mind."

"Never mind is indicative of your attitude." Jeanne-Marie's tone was cold. "According to our records you have spent more hours on punishment duty than anyone else in your age group. We discussed your case and I must admit that I was one of the voices that voted for clemency." She folded her work-scarred hands on the dark polished wood. "After speaking with you I find myself doubting my vote. So I am changing it." She looked up and down the long table. "Do any of you wish to change your votes?" she asked the other four Board members.

Unanimously they shook their heads.

They hadn't really listened to him. Darin stared through the big window behind them, letting the distant horizon seize his gaze. That horizon could hide anything—magic islands, mermaids, giant squids. . . .

For the members of the Board, all it hid was more ocean and more fish, he thought bitterly. *The Fancy* would steam right past magic islands because they had no license for any land species. They would harpoon the mermaids, because there was no limit on mermaids. His lips twitched.

"What can possibly amuse you?" Jeanne-Marie asked with asperity. "Share it with us, please."

Darin looked at them, filled with a thick stillness, like the air before a storm. The entire Board was scowling at him, but only Jeanne-Marie really seemed to be waiting for his answer. He met her faded eyes. "You know, you only get to see this view if you pilot *The Fancy*." He smiled. "Or if you get called up in front of the Board."

Someone murmured something in a low hostile voice but Jeanne-Marie merely nodded. "You will be fifteen in three months. You will have reached your majority, and will be expected to have found a place for yourself in this community. If you have not done so, we will be forced to put you ashore. You will not be the first individual who simply could not fit into our community. Until then, you are on probation. Further misbehavior on your part may be grounds for sending you immediately ashore."

You are close enough to your majority to warrant it," she said heavily. "Do you really want to be put ashore?"

Ashore. Her words shocked him even though he had expected nothing else. They were citizens of no country, and the drylanders had no desire to share their dwindling resources with the sea folk. People who went ashore were rarely heard from again. "Go ahead." He straightened his shoulders defiantly. "I haven't done anything but say what I thought. I didn't hit Scully. He lied about that."

"You are very young." Jeanne-Marie's face closed in on itself. "You have three months during which I hope you will comprehend the importance of attitude and morale to a community such as ours. For your dereliction from your shift, you are fined twenty-one consecutive hours of community labor. This Board meeting is adjourned." And she slapped her palm sharply on the tabletop.

They hadn't heard him. Or maybe . . . they had. Maybe that was why they were going to put him ashore. Darin turned his back on the view from the bow. A giant picture hung on the aft wall of the room, facing the Board. On it, a huge ship with a clean flat deck steamed across a blue sea. A jet lifted sharply from its deck. A small brass plate mounted on the heavy frame bore her name: *The Enterprise*.

Darin wondered when it had been changed to *The Fancy*. A handful of people were sitting in the audience chairs because someone was always looking over your shoulder in this place. At least his Uncle Jerry wasn't there. Eyes averted so that he didn't have to see the expressions on the faces, he marched past them and out of the Board Room.

Numb, he let his feet carry him down the passageway, pushed through the heavy hatch at its end, and crossed a short section of open deck to the forward ladder. Wind snatched at him as he climbed up onto the clutter of the Fungus, ruffling his short hair, prying chilly fingers down the neck of his sweatshirt. A scout copter lifted aft as he reached the Garden deck. It spiraled up and out, then veered off to search the sea ahead for harvestable fish. There were a lot of people working in the gardens this time of day, weeding and watering or picking produce for the Mess. Darin walked quickly forward, imagining that they all stared at him with the Board's hostile eyes. He slipped into his private space behind the tool locker and halted abruptly. The dark-skinned doryman Brandt was sitting there, back against the wall, legs dangling over the scupper like Darin's legs dangled when he sat here.

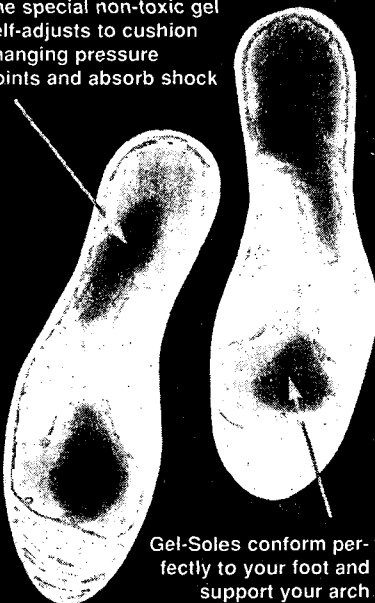
"Don't go," Brandt said as Darin backed quickly away. "I figured you'd head up here. I would have. You were right about the view. In effect you only get to see it if you're at the top or the bottom of this heap." He let his eyes wander toward the horizon beyond the bow. "Out here, anyone can look. Is that why you come here?"

"I . . . don't know." Darin's tongue stumbled over the words. The dory-

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man had been in the audience?

"Do you really want to go ashore?" Brandt raised one eyebrow, the planes of his face sharp beneath the black stubble of his doryman's buzz.

It was the same question Jeanne-Marie had asked, but it wasn't. She hadn't really been *asking*. Again, those sea-colored eyes demanded truth. "I'm not sure it makes any difference," Darin said slowly.

"I went ashore. When I wasn't much older than you." Brandt turned to stare out at the horizon. "I . . . was glad to come back."

"You're a doryman." Darin blushed, his heart thudding in his chest, because the words had come out as an accusation, and now this man would order him away, would stare at him with all of Jeanne-Marie's scorn.

"Yes, I am." For a few moments Brandt was silent, his hands thrust deep into his pockets, his eyes on the distant horizon. "Does that make a difference?" He frowned. "I knew I'd inherit my mother's dory, but I still left. I came back with nothing—except my life. And Lia." He looked at Darin, finally. "I bought your Community Service hours." He gave Darin a crooked smile. "I want you in Hangar Bay Three at six A.M. tomorrow. You have twenty-one hours to show me if you're any good in a collie. Meet me at *The Lady*."

Darin gaped as Brandt walked past him, all words driven from his head by the doryman's incredible command. "I'll be there," he gasped, but by then, Brandt was out of sight, hidden by the tangled greenery of the garden beds. For a long time Darin stared out at that horizon, half expecting to see the spires of a magical island appear.

He had just been hired to pilot a collie. Sort of. And threatened with shore, all in the same hour. Darin shook his head, dazed. Brandt had gone ashore. He had come back. Just beyond the line of *The Fancy's* bow wave, a pale shape surfaced. A white dolphin. Darin grinned suddenly, raised his hand to it. For a moment, the creature reared out of the water, as if it was returning the wave. Then it dove and vanished.

Still grinning, oblivious to the looks he got as he threaded his way back through the gardens, he went down to his Uncle Jerry's cramped cabin.

Uncle Jerry lived on 05 deck, the slummiest part of the *Fungus*. And unexpectedly he was there, back early from his shift on the gut-line, because the dories weren't bringing anything in right now and they'd shut down. So he was in a foul mood. "You little bastard," he said before Darin had even closed the cabin door. "You got nothing better to do than make trouble." He glowered from the table that along with the bunk crowded the small space to overflowing. "How are you going to pay for your share of my space if you're doing Community hours for free, huh?" He glowered. "Answer me, boy."

Darin wondered how long it had taken someone to tell his uncle about Darin's sentence. Not long. "Hey, no problem." Darin shrugged, sick of the cluttered filthy cabin, the thick odor of unwashed clothes and his un-

cle's sweat. "A doryman bought my hours." He shrugged. "If I'm a collie pilot I can move out. I won't be in your face any more."

Uncle Jerry came up out of his chair in one smooth lunge, and his slap sent Darin reeling back against the wall. The back of his head banged the electrical conduit that ran along the wall and red light webbed his vision.

"Don't get smart with me." Uncle Jerry stared down at him, his face twisted with anger. "You loser. You would have ended up ashore if I hadn't taken you in when you were little."

"You got a subsidy to take me in," Darin hissed, and braced himself for another blow.

"Yeah, but I did it. I didn't have to." Uncle Jerry bared his teeth in a grin. "You're so hot, huh? Let me tell you what's really going on. This doryman just got freebie labor for twenty-one hours. The minute your contract is up he'll dump your ass for somebody with some skill." He turned away.

Darin crouched against the wall, muscles wire-tight, ready to hit this man. Hurt him. Uncle Jerry ignored him, combing his hair, getting ready to leave for his Mah-Jongg game. Darin let his breath out in a rush and straightened slowly. He stalked over to his bunk and lay down with his face to the wall.

"You better get your act together," his uncle said as he opened the door. "Or you'll be living with the drylanders."

Darin listened to the door slam, his lips pressed together, not speaking. Because his uncle could be right. Cheap labor might be all Brandt was after. Back when he was too young for a shift he had been one of the best on the collie simulators down on Mess deck. Piloting the little submersible through a hundred virtual adventures, he had dreamed little-kid dreams about being hired by a doryman. In the last couple of years punishment shifts had eaten a lot of his free time. There hadn't been enough left to make it worth the wait in line for a simulator. Someone with more skill would be easy to find.

Darin burrowed into his pillow, his earlier elation gone. It wasn't just the possible truth of his uncle's statements—it was that he'd thrown that collie offer in Uncle Jerry's face, used it as a weapon. It cheapened what Brandt had offered, made his uncle's guess seem more likely. Darin didn't fall asleep until long after Jerry had stumbled home from his game, stoned and happy from a winning night. When he did, he dreamed that a dozen white dolphins ringed him as he drifted helplessly in a stalled collie, staring at him with dark accusing eyes.

He slipped out of the cabin while his uncle snored, was in Hangar Bay Three by 5:30. Darin tiptoed through the alien dusk of the vast space, twitching at every noise. You weren't welcome down here if you weren't a doryman or a collie pilot, although it was a favorite spot for lovers. The

dories and collies crouched on their pallets. The larger, clumsier dories with their gaping maws towered over the small sleek orca-shapes of the collies. Darin's footsteps sounded loud in the quiet as he searched for Brandt's dory. The scouts must not have called in a fish alert, because the bay was almost deserted.

Slowly he walked the rows, searching for *The Lady*. The dories were painted solid colors with their names emblazoned on the port side. The collies tended to be bright, striped and slashed with neon blues and yellows. The dorymen owned their collies and leased them to the pilots.

The dorymen had to be quick to fill their purse nets. And careful. It cost labor and risk to release unlicensed species without damaging them. If an inspector landed on *The Fancy* and found traces of unlicensed fish on board, the ship would pay a big fine.

It was the loss to their reputation that mattered to the dorymen. Rumor was that Brandt had never scooped an illegal fish. Not once. Darin slipped between two brightly painted collies and there she was—*The Lady*. Painted a rich dolphin-gray, she gleamed, the last molecule of salt polished from her hull. Her name was written on her side in flowing script. Darin ran his fingers gently across her sleek hull, polished away the faint mark with his sweatshirt sleeve.

"You're here early." Brandt appeared on the far side of her. His eyes went to Darin's bruised face and he frowned briefly. Then he yawned and smiled. "So, let me introduce you to your collie."

Your collie. Instead of pride, the words evoked an echo of last night's dream. His collie maybe, but only until Brandt had judged his performance. He swallowed and followed Brandt around to *The Lady's* far side. Her collie wasn't neon-bright like some of the others. It was a dark royal blue with gleaming silver eyes painted on each side of its blunt bow. Dorymen all painted eyes on their collies. To help them see the freshmarket and package species. Brandt cracked the cockpit.

"Get in and get a feel for it." He nodded. "The Mess deck sims are of an older model. But you should be able to get the hang of this one pretty fast."

The little collie wasn't a whole lot longer than Darin. He lay down on his belly on the couch, discovered that his feet didn't quite reach the pedals. As he pulled on the control gloves, Brandt leaned across him and moved the foot-controls forward, snugging the pedals up against the soles of Darin's feet. "Push and you get power," he said. "Pressure on one side or the other turns you and you fine-tune it with your gloves." He waited for Darin to put on his goggles, powered on the system.

The bay disappeared, reappeared in an eyeblink, but now it looked ultra sharp, with a strange depth that it hadn't had before, as if everything was a little too close, a little too bright.

"You got a lot of eyes on that hull," Brandt was saying. "The computer

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does a pretty good job of integrating them into reasonable approximation of human vision, but it's not perfect. You'll need to practice grabbing with your hands. You don't need to use them very often, but when you do, you need to catch what you're grabbing at." He sighed, a brief dissatisfied note. "If my last pilot had spent a little more time practicing with his hands, he'd still be working for me."

His tone added to the flutter in Darin's stomach. Brandt was the best. He wouldn't tolerate anything less in a collie pilot.

"The blue star in your heads-up is the sonic wand," Brandt went on. "Your index fingers act as mice when you stiffen your hand and point. Click on the star with your right hand to toggle the sonic broadcast off and on. Left-hand click increases or decreases the power. You'll need to get a feel for how fish react, so that you don't scatter a nice school halfway to the Ross Sea with too strong a broadcast."

Darin blinked as the bay shimmered again and returned to normal.

"If anything goes wrong, you got a homing beacon. If you get lost, click on the pigeon icon. The collie will bring you back to the ship." He nodded. "That's about all I can show you in here." For a moment he studied Darin silently. "Think of the dory as the hand. The collie is the fingers. That's how we have to work together. So let's hook up and get these babies into the water." He slapped the collie's hull lightly. "This is Lia's day off from the freshmarket tank and I told her I'd be home for lunch."

A pair of cables were already trundling across the overhead track toward them. Brandt must have signaled the crane operator. They were going out. Right now. Darin's heart began to pound out a hard, fast rhythm.

"You know, some people can't handle it—under the water, I mean." Brandt was studying his face. "The drowning instincts are too strong, I guess. There's no dishonor in it," he said gently. "You can't fight your brain."

"Hey, no problem," Darin said, and his voice barely trembled.

They hooked *The Lady* and her collie to the overhead track, stood back as the operator lifted them above the parked boats, then followed the craft out to the launch deck. The collie always went in first. This time, Brandt hooked the collie onto the launch cable as Darin settled himself into his couch and donned goggles and gloves. After he'd put them on, Darin would hook himself up.

"See you below," Brandt said, and stepped back as Darin sealed the hatch.

Darin glanced up at the crane operator in his box, swallowing saliva. A clumsy operator could flip a collie, smash it against *The Fancy's* hull. He knew the operator by sight—a stocky man with curly hair and thick stubble, descended from Black Sea fishermen, or so he said. He was watching Darin with a sly grin on his face. Darin rolled back into place and drew a deep breath. Suddenly the controls felt strange. Clunky. His dream came

back to him—sinking, the white dolphins staring at him. He checked gloves and goggles one more time and flipped a thumbs-up at the operator.

The collie swayed, jerked upward like a fish snagged on a line. Darin's stomach dropped and he clenched his teeth. Not quite so careful with a mere collie? Or was this some sort of initiation for a new pilot? He was swinging now, and a sick fear seized him, merging with his growing nausea. He would hit the side and the collie would crumple, fold in on itself like a crushed can. . . . Then they dropped. Darin choked off a cry and a second later the collie splashed down, jarring his teeth together so that he bit his tongue. Release the hook! He fumbled for the icon, terrified that he'd miss it, that the cable would drag him back against *The Fancy's* side.

The collie shuddered and bucked, hammered by the turbulence of *The Fancy's* passage, trying to tumble. The crane operator hadn't extended the breakwater that provided quiet water for the dories and collies to launch into. He was sinking. For a frozen instant Darin couldn't move, couldn't breathe, was drowning as blue water closed over his head, and *up and down* lost their meaning.

If she hit *The Fancy*, Brandt's collie would be damaged. Darin's paralysis ended and he spread his fingers—no time to think—struggling to stabilize her the way he'd done it a thousand times on the simulator. For a heart-stopping moment he was staring at the gray flank of *The Fancy*, close enough to see the clumps of barnacles that crusted her. Then the collie was veering off, straightening out, no longer sinking.

The Lady appeared in front of him, swooping into his field of vision like an inquisitive orca. "Wake up, collie!" Brandt's voice was sharp and clear in his ears. "You okay, Darin?"

"Yes," he gasped. He clenched his fists, feet shoving reflexively against the control pads. The collie shot forward like a dolphin and *The Lady* skittered out of his way. "Sorry." Teeth clenched, Darin yanked his feet off the power, slowed and began to sink again. This time, he pressed on the pedals a little more gently.

"You're trying too hard." There was a smile in Brandt's voice. "Just relax and play around. This isn't a test. Nobody's a dolphin on their first run, so don't try to be."

Only it was a test, and he was going to fuck it up if he didn't get that out of his head. Darin drew a deep breath smelling the rank stink of his own sweat, trying to relax. All right, what if Brandt wasn't there watching him? If this was a simulator and he had all day to kill, what would he do?

Get the feel of basic maneuvers. Then maybe try to pick something up—work with the three fingered hands and the arms. Darin told himself that Brandt had gone back to *The Fancy* to have lunch with Lia, that he was on his own out here until he got tired, that nobody gave a damn when he came in.

And managed to believe it . . . a little bit. The collie responded to the slightest movement of his hands and feet. He discovered that he shouldn't try to steer. All he had to do was think about where he wanted to go, kind of urge the collie that way—and he went there. *The Fancy* was running north along the edge of the continental shelf, so they were in pretty deep water. He had plenty of room to bank and turn, and finally took the collie through a series of loops and spirals that left him grinning, full of the same rush he'd gotten when he was little, snatching forbidden thrills by sliding down the guy wires on the radar towers, topside.

Now he needed to try out the wand. And his hands. He glanced at the compass points on his heads-up and banked shoreward. Spreading his fingers unlimbered his mechanical arms and he stretched them forward. As with the power controls, they reacted to the slightest hint of muscle movement. This kind of sensitivity would give you hair-trigger responses if you got good with it. Or really mess you up, if you were clumsy. Corals ahead, shadowing the blue murk of the water. He angled down toward them, passing above the first huge spires of Giant corals. Another mutation, the creatures multiplied at an incredible rate, even in cooler water. He'd heard that they had to blast every day to keep San Francisco Bay open. In L.A., they'd let the coral fill in the harbor completely and had built out onto it.

Fish up ahead—a small school. A red circle appeared around it. That meant they weren't on his legal list. Darin pointed at the blue star, moved it onto the school and clicked it on. The school exploded, scattering in all directions. Oops. He reduced the power, found another school and tried again. This one darted away from him, but it didn't scatter. Aha. You point your finger like it's the wand—don't point at the center of the fish or they scatter. With some more practice he discovered that he could sweep them along with the wand as if he was brushing crumbs across a table with his cupped hand.

The grabbing part was easy. The three fingers and thumb closed neatly around the tangled mass of a brittle star and he plucked it gently from the rock. It sank slowly as he dropped it, its multiple arms writhing.

"I think you've got the hang of it." Brandt's voice sent the collie bolting forward a good three meters, because Darin had forgotten entirely that Brandt was even around.

"Thanks." Darin flushed as he stilled the collie.

"Let's catch a few fish."

"I haven't seen anything legal," Darin said uncertainly. Wondering if this was another kind of test.

"I know. But we can round up a few snapper. I opened my purse so they'll just go on through. Shouldn't even bruise them."

The fish the dories grabbed ended up in the purse net inside the dory's hollow belly. Usually the net would be opened on deck, dumping the

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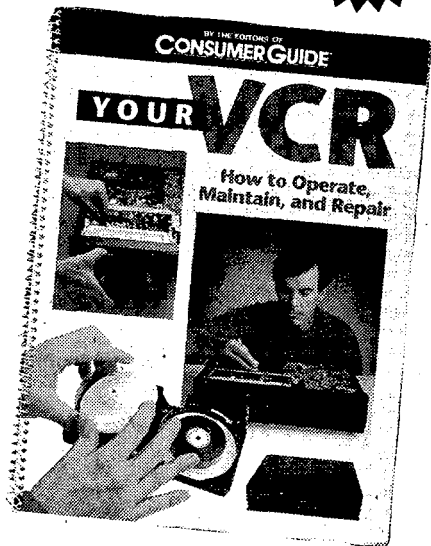


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catch into a temporary tank until the freshmarket species could be separated for transfer to the big holding tanks. The rest were sorted into surimi or market-package species and sent to the appropriate gut-line.

"Okay, let's fish," Darin said. "Tell me how you want me to do it. I don't have a clue."

"You're right. You don't." Brandt sounded approving. *The Lady* cruised up beside him, banked gently between fanged mountains of Giant coral. "There's no real rule for this. Whatever works for us is right. Basically, I want you to circle whatever I'm after and get it close enough to me that I can sweep it in. Sometimes it's a whole school and you can just push it along with your wand. Sometimes I'm after singles and you'll have to cut them away from a reef. And I *don't* bring unlicensed fish on board, so don't make me dump my purse."

There was a flat tone of warning in that last sentence. Darin wondered suddenly how many times the last pilot had forced Brandt to dump his catch. Maybe once was enough. He banked after Brandt, his stomach tight again.

"I want that grouper."

On Darin's display, a neon blue circle appeared around a thick-bodied sluggish fish browsing among small toothed masses of coral. It overlapped a red warning circle. Darin bit his lip as he drifted closer. The grouper edged away with a skittish sideways sweep of its tail. Heading deeper into the impenetrable coral, of course. Frantically Darin scanned the terrain. The fish was about to dodge around that big outcrop. Maybe if he circled out, came in from that direction . . . he skipped over a mound of crumbling dead coral, darted forward to head the grouper off. Setting the wand to low, he pointed. Nothing. The fish was heading in the wrong direction, would slip past him in a minute. He glanced at *The Lady* hanging silent and motionless on the far side of the coral, increased the wand's broadcast.

With an angry twitch of its tail, the big grouper darted away from him. For a heart-stopping moment Darin thought it was going to cut back between Darin and the outcrop, that the wand was still set too low to stop it. Then it veered and fled straight toward *The Lady*.

With a flash of movement almost too fast to see, Brandt scooped it into *The Lady's* maw with the five net-webbed fingers of one long arm. "Not bad. Let's try again."

Not sure if he'd done well or been incredibly clumsy, Darin went after the next blue-circled fish. This one got away, diving down and beneath Brandt's sweeping arm. He did better with small schools, losing only a few individuals as Brandt swept the fish in with both arms.

"We'd better head back in."

Brandt's voice made him blink as Darin stared at the coral landscape, waiting for the next blue circle. "Yeah," he said, and his voice came out a

croak. "I guess maybe."

"Put your collie on Follow." Brandt's voice was gentle. "You can take a break."

"That's okay." Darin shook his head, winced as a muscle cramped in his shoulder. "I'll take her back."

"Suit yourself."

He stayed on Brandt's flank all the way back to the ship. It was a long way and his calf muscles threatened to cramp, too. He briefly regretted not taking Brandt up on his offer of a ride, but a part of him didn't want to let go of control, let someone else, even Brandt, pilot the collie. Not while he was in her. *The Lady* stopped so suddenly that Darin overreacted, sending the collie into a gut-wrenching reverse. Then he sucked in his breath and stared.

A white dolphin drifted in the water in front of them.

Mutations. Perhaps they were the offspring of radioactive waste that had seeped from land to sea, aftermath of the Backpack Wars, byproduct of casual dumping. There were a lot of mutations in the world oceans. But it was hard to think of this creature as a mistake.

The white dolphin stared back at them, pale as a ghost. Its nose was more blunt than the bottlenose variety and its front flippers were long, armlike. The tail was grooved along the dorsal surface, as if it were trying to split into legs. They could crawl, the stories went. If they beached, they would hump themselves across the sand back to the water. They screamed when you harpooned them, and there were stories that people went mad when they heard a white dolphin scream in agony. Stories, lots of stories. It was the creature's eyes that held Darin. Huge, dark, they seemed to fix on his own, held him so that he couldn't look away.

The dolphin opened his mouth, revealing a row of short, sharp teeth. He arched as if he was bowing to them, turned and darted gracefully away, propelled by sweeps of his powerful tail. Its tail fin looked as if it was strengthened by long bones, like elongated toes. Darin stared after him, straining for another glimpse.

"So." Brandt's voice was soft in his ears. "You got to see one up close. What did he say to you?"

"He was smiling," Darin said. He. They both knew the dolphin was a he. "Do you know what he said?" He stared at *The Lady* as if he could read Brandt's expression through her hull, full of sudden excitement. "Can they really talk? Can you understand them?"

"He was smiling," Brandt said softly. "We'd better get back."

"Yeah," Darin said, but for a moment neither of them moved. He had the feeling that Brandt, too, was staring into the blue distance where the dolphin had disappeared.

Then *The Lady* eased into motion, and Darin's leg cramped, and the moment ended.

The crane operator lowered the trapeze for them. Brandt extended his hook and swam *The Lady* onto the trapeze. Her hook locked onto it and the crane lifted her. The collie went in first and came aboard last. This time, the operator had extended the breakwater. Struggling to hold the collie in position alongside the ponderously moving *Fancy*, fighting the cramps that threatened to send him careening into the hull, Darin was too tired to be anything but grateful for the relatively smooth water this time. It felt as if years passed before the trapeze dropped for him. Although it couldn't have been because they hadn't encountered a single legal fish the whole time out, so Brandt had nothing to unload.

He swam the collie onto the trapeze on his first try. Teeth gritted, Darin braced himself as the collie began to lift. The operator swung him easily over the deck and set him down without the slightest jar. Darin popped the hatch, his finger shaky on the control, and climbed out. His left leg cramped fiercely as he set foot on the deck and he clung to the side of the collie, racked by embarrassment and pain. Up in his tower, the crane operator nodded, his expression impassive.

"This will help." Brandt came up beside him. "Lift your chin." He smoothed a small drug patch onto the groove of Darin's jugular. "It's the tension," he said. "And the unfamiliar position. And you're a little hypothermic, although you don't realize it yet. It won't be so bad after this." He frowned and touched Darin's bruised cheek lightly. "How did this happen?"

"My uncle." Darin's teeth wanted to chatter—he hadn't noticed, but Brandt was right, it had been cold in the collie. He sighed as the drug began to seep into his veins like warm water. "When I do Community time, I don't get as many line hours. I owe him rent. *The Fancy* only pays support until you're old enough to work a shift." He looked up at Brandt. "Do they really talk to you?" he asked softly.

"Not with words." Brandt nodded, his expression unreadable. "What did you feel?"

Feel . . . Darin shivered, remembering the dark wells of those eyes. "Smiling," he said hesitantly. "Curiosity. A little bit . . . of wariness." Brandt's hand closed on his shoulder, squeezed.

"You did good today. When you're not trying so hard, you'll do a lot better. We won't stay out so long tomorrow," he said ruefully.

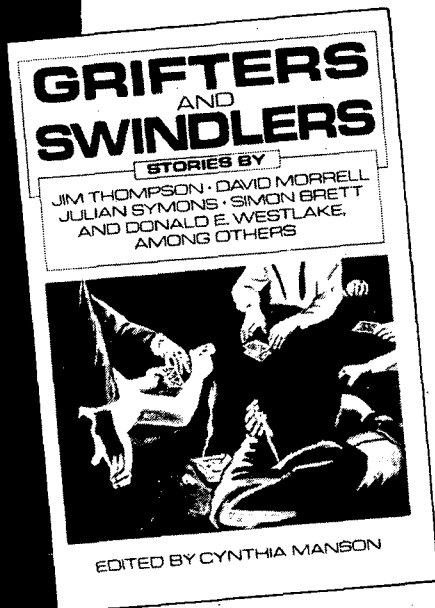
With a start Darin realized that the sun was sinking, that it was late afternoon and they'd been out since morning. He hadn't taken the time to go by the Mess this morning and suddenly his belly was nothing but a space of hollow emptiness beneath his ribs.

"Let's get the boats scrubbed down and stowed." Brandt's fingers squeezed again, as if he'd read Darin's thoughts. "And then you can come eat dinner with Lia and me. If you'd like to."

"Thank you," Darin said, stumbling over the words. A doryman had

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just invited him to dinner. No, he thought. *Brandt* had just invited him to dinner. A sudden warmth filled him, condensing into a strange aching ball in his chest. "I'd like that a lot," he said.

"Good." Brandt nodded. "So go grab us a hose."

They worked together, he and Brandt, although Brandt by custom should have stood back and let him do it all. Brandt's touch on *The Lady's* sleek hull was like a man touching his lover. He watched Darin critically as Darin rinsed the collie's hull and vacuumed out the spotless interior, and nodded approval. Finally they hooked the boats onto the overhead crane, got them lifted, and ran them back to their pallets.

As he tied down the collie, the last of Darin's strength faded. The drug Brandt had given him had stopped the cramps, but he began to tremble. Biting his lip he forced himself to stand up straight, afraid that Brandt would see and send him home:

"Our stateroom is forward on the 03 deck." Brandt eyed him with a worried expression. "Think you can hold up a little longer?"

"Sure." Darin made his voice nonchalant. "Hey, no problem."

Brandt's glance might have held just the slightest hint of amusement. Darin couldn't be sure.

The elevator was at the far end of the hangar—almost beyond his ability to walk. It was a privilege reserved for dorymen and their collie pilots. Right now, Darin was only glad he didn't have to try and climb any ladders. Another doryman was stepping off the open platform as they approached. Rena. She ranked just below Brandt in reputation.

"Yo, Brandt." She lifted a hand in greeting, petite, dark-skinned, descendant of Martinique fishermen. "You were out?" She raised her eyebrows. "Find something the scouts missed again? I wish I had your luck."

"We didn't see anything legal." Brandt shrugged. "I haven't seen much since we filled our quota for shark. I was breaking in Darin here on the collie. Darin, meet Rena."

"Looks like he did a job on you, kid." Rena looked at Darin and laughed. "Brandt, you're too tough on yourself and your pilots. The only member of the team you won't overwork is *The Lady*."

"Yeah, maybe." He actually looked a little embarrassed.

"Hey kid, pay attention to him." Rena winked at Darin. "Nobody's better than Brandt. Just don't let him work you to death. And don't let him turn those dolphs into mermaids for you. They bring good money, land-side."

"White dolphs?" Darin stared at her, his brain fuzzy with exhaustion and Brandt's drug. "You kill them?"

"When I can. Which isn't often." She grimaced. "I think they hear me coming." She tossed her cropped head. "They're not licensed. Means there's no quota. No limit. There aren't a whole lot of species in this ocean that don't have a limit. Like none, except the new mutations." She start-

ed to walk past them.

"Wait a minute." Darin stepped into her path. "They can talk. Don't you know? Brandt hears them, and I did, too. How can you kill them? Maybe they're like us."

"Where did you pick this one up?" Rena rolled her eyes at Brandt, stepped lightly around Darin and walked into the bay, whistling.

"Brandt, *tell* her." Darin started after Rena, stopped as Brandt's hand closed firmly on his arm.

"Don't," Brandt said heavily. "People believe what they want to believe. You can't tell them what they don't want to hear. You found that out in front of the Board, didn't you?" His tone was compassionate. "Rena has a temper. Don't make trouble for yourself."

He had been making trouble for himself since he could talk, Darin thought bitterly. But maybe he would make trouble for Brandt, too. "I'm sorry." He shuffled his feet as Brandt stepped onto the elevator, no longer sure that his invitation to dinner still applied.

"Come on." Brandt smiled at him. "I'm not angry at you. Some things you just can't fight. White dolphins aren't a licensed species and people do whatever they want to do. Let's not keep Lia waiting."

Brandt was right, Darin told himself as he stepped onto the elevator platform. But it still felt *wrong*, not to have run after Rena.

"Have you ever wondered how they came to be?" Brandt sounded unexpectedly sad.

"Mutation," Darin said hesitantly.

"Maybe." Brandt nodded, not quite looking at Darin. "I wonder if they're not something left over from the old days—from when the scientists created new types of people by splicing animal genes into human chromosomes."

"You get the death penalty for that." Darin blinked. "You and everybody you work with."

"Genes created a lot of our best freshmarket species—like the nucod and the redmeat tunas. They did a lot of genetic engineering in the old days."

"You think they were made?" Darin said. "Why would anyone make something like that?"

"Maybe their ancestors were different. Maybe they changed as they bred with each other. I don't know." He frowned at the wall of the elevator. "We've done so much damage to the land. Maybe God, or Gaia, or random chance is going to give someone else a chance, this time around." He looked at Darin at last, his eyes shadowed and full of something that might have been pain. "You know, our old myths are full of mermaids, but they're always human, even if part of their body is fish. They're part human and part fish, stuck together, and that human part doesn't really belong in the sea and the fish part can't live on land. And even then they're mostly dangerous. That's part of a lot of the old stories. I think the

old myths are part of us. You can't really go up against them."

"Do you think the white dolphins are dangerous?" Darin asked, not sure what Brandt was getting at.

"The old mermaids aren't really *of the sea*," Brandt frowned. "The white dolphins . . . they aren't human. But I'm . . . not sure they're fish either. Maybe that's why they were never licensed. *Other* frightens us." Brandt's stare had turned inward. "We will never be *of the sea*." The doors opened, and he smiled, his dark mood vanishing. "Let's get you some dinner," he said as he stepped into the passageway. "And me, too."

Darin followed, his feet dragging, but not entirely from fatigue. Brandt's speech in the elevator had had the feel of . . . an apology. An apology for what? And to whom? It suddenly hit him that Rena hadn't believed him when he had said that Brandt knew the dolphins could talk. As if Brandt had never said anything about it. He looked at Brandt's back and told himself that he was tired, and Brandt was right. People heard what they wanted to hear and forgot the rest. Brandt had told Rena that the dolphins could talk. She had chosen to forget it, that was all.

Now his knees were really shaking and he stumbled as he followed Brandt down the passageway. The ceilings were higher here, the passageway wide, and brightly lit. The steel walls were pale yellow and the overhead pipes and conduit had been painted in bright contrasting colors. The people who lived on the Gallery deck held the high-end line jobs, or did administration, or ran the most successful shops or food stands. Darin followed on Brandt's heels, out of his territory, afraid that he'd be left behind, lost. They turned a corner and Brandt stopped in front of a door that was painted a pale blue. Darin stopped a few paces away. Brandt was smiling in a way that brightened his face, made him handsome.

The door opened, even though he hadn't knocked.

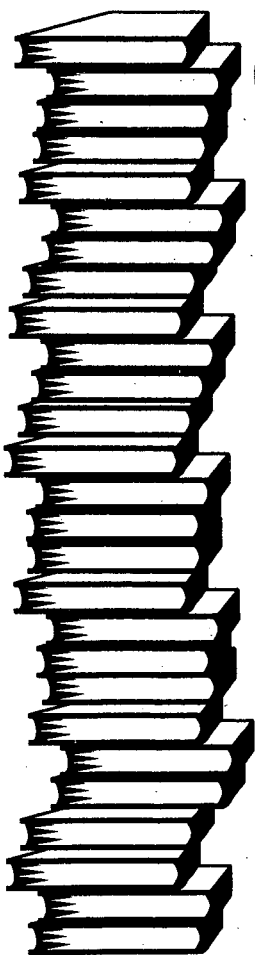
A woman stood in the doorway, smiling, hand held out in welcome. She was very fair and small—at least a head shorter than Brandt—just about Darin's height. Stocky, she had thick legs, a sturdy waist, and muscled arms, as if she spent time in the gym every day. Darin noticed this with only the periphery of his mind. His soul was focused on her eyes.

They were enormous, night-dark, as if they were all pupil. The irises themselves were dark enough to look almost black. It was like looking through windows into a nighttime landscape. For a moment, dizzy with fatigue and the events of this amazing day, he had the feeling that if he only watched long enough, dawn would break beyond those clear windows and he would see . . . somewhere else.

They reminded him of the white dolphin's eyes.

Then Brandt was laughing, reaching with both hands to pull her to him. "Lia, I missed you. I always miss you." He hugged her, kissing her on the lips, with enough passion and sensuality to make Darin look

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away. "I'm sorry I didn't make it back for lunch." He turned to Darin, one arm still around her, his face shining with pride. "This is Lia. My love." His expression softened as he looked down at her, turning that pride into a rich warmth, like the touch of the afternoon sun on a cloudless day. "Lia, this is Darin. The one I told you about."

She was looking at him with those midnight eyes, holding out her long-fingered hand. There were tiny webs between her fingers, small folds of pale, translucent skin just where her fingers met her palm. Darin took her hand, never hesitating, because they looked right. They looked beautiful. Her hair was pale blonde, and her skin was almost albino white, as if she never went out in the sun at all. A scatter of bronze freckles dusted her face and shoulders. She smiled, and Darin felt suddenly welcomed, found himself relaxing.

"Lia doesn't talk much. She has a speech impediment, but once you get used to it, you'll be able to understand her just fine." Brandt was nodding, his smile broad and pleased, as if Darin had just passed another test. "Darin's going to have dinner with us." He brushed a lock of hair back from her cheek, and she smiled up at him, leaning into the curve of his arm as if her body had been designed for his.

Brandt loved her, even though she was . . . different. Darin looked away, stabbed by something that felt like jealousy.

Then they were all three crowding into the tiny room and Brandt was telling her about their day on the Shelf, how Darin had a natural feel for the collie, how they hadn't seen a single fish he could take, how *The Fancy* had already filled her quotas on so many of the licensed species that they were probably going to get clear up into arctic waters before they found anything legal to catch. And Darin was only half hearing, trying not to stare as he looked around the cabin.

They had two whole rooms, although neither was much larger than Uncle Jerry's space. A scatter of woven rugs covered the deck, along with big cushions for sitting and a low table. There was even a tiny kitchen space at one end of the main room. The walls held his attention. They had been painted with murals of reef scenes; and he knew without even asking that Lia had painted them. Bright fish darted between graceful spires of coral and a pair of orcas hunted across one wall. A single wall had been left bare. A big video screen was mounted on it. The low table in front of it had been set for three.

Three. Darin noticed that, and the hairs stirred on the back of his neck. They had left him to his looking, were leaning against the tiny kitchen counter on the other side of the main room, laughing together. Her laughter was like the sound of a far-away channel-buoy, when distance and fog have softened the harsh warning clang, filtered out all but the high clear chime of the bell.

"Come and get it," Brandt said, that pride still humming in his voice.

It was chowder of course, chunks of fish in a fish stock, but there were vegetables in it, too. Tomatoes, and bits of greens that he couldn't name, but whose subtle taste made him empty his bowl too fast. Lia filled it silently, without even asking him if he wanted more. And there was bread, flat and brown, with seeds on top. It wasn't much different from what he'd be getting in the Mess—but it wasn't the same thing at all. That sense of *familiar* and *different* at the same time increased his sense of unreality.

This was definitely a dream, he decided as he ate his second bowl of chowder—more slowly this time. In a little while he'd wake up on his bunk and hear Uncle Jerry snoring.

Brandt picked up the empty bowls and carried them to the counter to clean them. Returning, he touched the wall-screen so that it flickered to life. "What about your uncle, Darin?" He raised his eyebrows. "Is he going to worry that you aren't home?" His face creased in concern. "I'm sorry. I should have asked if you needed to call him." He nodded at the screen.

Darin stared at him tongue-tied. Because Brandt wasn't just asking him, he was asking *about* him—who he was when he wasn't here. Where he lived and with whom. He had asked it as if they were friends—the same way he'd invited Darin home to dinner. As if he expected Darin to tell him about his family, where he lived and how. Darin looked down at himself, seeing his worn T-shirt and frayed shorts as if for the first time—seeing the holes, seeing the way his webbing belt bunched Uncle Jerry's cut-off pants into thick gathers around his skinny waist. And he was ashamed. He kept his gaze on his bare dirty feet, torn by necessary silence. If he told Brandt about Uncle Jerry, Brandt might think Uncle Jerry was part of *him*, Darin, and he wasn't. Never had been. Uncle Jerry had never wanted him, had taken him only because there was no one else to take him, so that they wouldn't put Darin ashore.

Lia touched his arm with her long, strange, webbed fingers. Her skin was cool like water and he looked up with a jerk. In time to see her shake her head at Brandt, frown, then smile. Brandt shrugged, leaned forward to touch in his selections on the screen. "Sit down and watch if you want." He leaned back, relaxed.

This was too much. To sit here on Brandt's sofa watching vids. It was too much change in too little time. Frozen with uncertainty, Darin scrambled for the right way to say no, so that Brandt wouldn't be offended, wouldn't tell him to get out and never come back, never show up in the dory bay again.

Lia smiled at him, her eyes full of night and understanding. "You can go," she said. The words were slurred, blurred by her speech impediment. But they released him, reassured him that Brandt wouldn't be angry.

"What time should I be in the bay, tomorrow?" Suddenly the words came easily.

"Not quite so early." Brandt grimaced. "How about nine?"

"You bet." Darin grinned, because he'd eaten dinner here, had met Lia, and now . . . he could leave. Lia opened the door for him and her smile warmed him. It kept him warm all the way up the ladder from the Gallery deck, clear up into the Fungus. He didn't stop at 05. Uncle Jerry might be back from his Mah-Jongg game and he might have lost tonight. Better to come in later, when he was asleep. He climbed all the way topside to the gardens, even though his aching legs threatened to cramp again.

The Milky Way was a band of diamond dust across the sky. Darin made his way between the scabby walls of the raised beds, caught a whiff of the herb that Lia had used in her chowder, heard the angry squawk of a disturbed gull. It was cool, and the wind wasn't too bad. The chowder had smoothed his exhaustion to a dreamy state that closed him into an intimate universe of sense and scent. He felt each individual hair stir in the breeze, smelled the gardens, fish, the sea, and a hint of garlic from someone's cooking. He reached his usual perch and sat on the very lip of the scupper. Beneath him, *The Fancy* lunged into the waves, and overhead one of the orbital platforms glittered like a pile of spilled jewels. He'd heard that the people who lived there had changed—because of the low gravity, or radiation, or maybe both. They didn't come down to Earth anymore and they didn't want Earth people coming up there. They dropped the metal they refined from asteroids down into the sea, lifting what they needed in the shuttles in return.

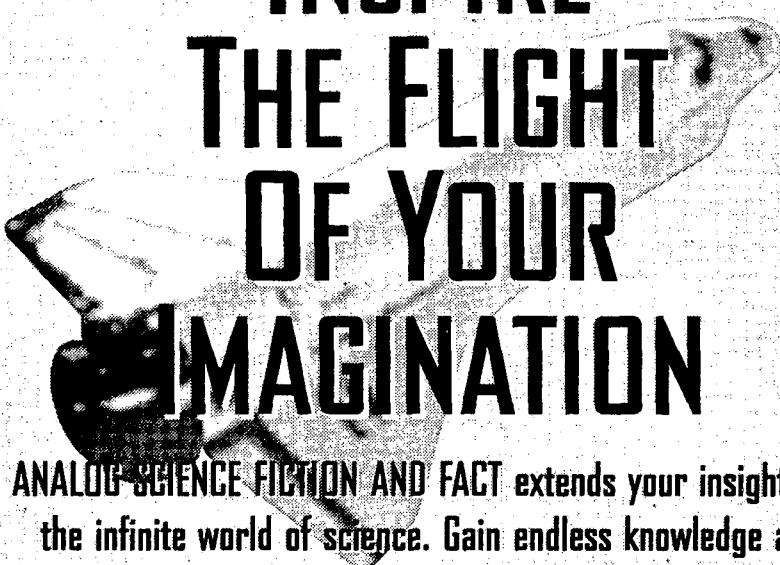
Maybe they were like the dolphins. "I am a collie pilot," he whispered to the night. And Brandt had invited him home, and it filled him with pride. And in the end, it didn't change anything.

This hurt. Because it was true—nothing had really changed. Darin tucked his feet under him, and started to stand up, meaning to creep into the cabin because Uncle Jerry would be asleep by now. The wind gusted and suddenly he heard thin clear notes of music, coming from below him. Darin leaned out over the edge, looked down on the sponson below.

A single figure stood on the small deck that bulged out from *The Fancy's* side, one foot on the low rail, playing a flute. It wasn't like any music he had ever heard. The wandering notes drew him into an unfamiliar landscape of key and rhythm that made him think of the fantastic coral spires he'd seen this afternoon. It filled his head with visions of watery twilight, undulating weed, and the strange dances of unfamiliar fish.

Beyond the musician, the night sea stretched to the horizon, wavetops glinting with flashes of planktonic lightning, as if the sea absorbed the light of the stars and flashed it back in cryptic messages. And then the musician lifted her head. Pale hair and skin gleamed in the moonlight

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and he recognized her suddenly. Lia. Her muscular shoulders moved with her playing, and her eyes were on that dark union of sea and starry sky.

Darin crouched in the scupper, transfixed. The music held him, speaking to him in a language he could almost understand—images of water and sky, sea song and longing. The kaleidoscopic blending of vision and emotion filled him with a terrible homesick yearning. She played on and on and Darin flowed through the night on the wind of her playing, wrung by emotion that washed through him like the tides. After awhile a figure appeared behind her, tall and silent. The music ended in a rush of notes that sounded like laughter and tears, and Lia lowered the flute. She turned, opening her arms to Brandt as he reached for her. They embraced, bodies merging into a single silhouette, and Darin looked away.

They went in together, but just before she passed out of sight beneath the cliff of the hull, she raised her head and looked directly at Darin. For a moment Darin had the giddy sense that she had looked into his eyes and through them, the same way he had wanted to look through hers. Only it was too dark for her to see his face and he was too far away.

He ducked from his hiding place and ran back across *The Fancy's* deck, scrambling aft to the starboard ladder and down to 05. He couldn't stop running, so he burst right between Scully and his buddy Moss who were waiting outside Uncle Jerry's door for him, scattering them like startled fish. He slammed the door behind him waking Uncle Jerry from his stoned sleep, earning himself a blow that sent him tumbling to the floor.

They didn't matter—not Scully, not his uncle. Darin burrowed into his blankets in the upper bunk, his head still full of Lia's music. It was only after Uncle Jerry had started to snore again that Darin became aware of the tightness of dried tears on his face. He couldn't remember crying. Wrapped in his blankets, he finally fell asleep to dream restless aching dreams of Lia's silver hair, her pale shoulders, and her dark, midnight eyes.

He was at *The Lady's* side an hour ahead of time next morning. Yesterday seemed distant and unreal—like a dream half-remembered. Then Rena walked by.

"Don't let him work you too hard," she said, and she was serious. "Brandt is obsessed with being the best. Do the both of you a favor and tell him to lighten up once in awhile." She winked. "Tell him I said to do it."

"Sure," he said. Yesterday had been real, after all. All of yesterday. "Rena?" He swallowed at her narrowed eyes as she paused. "Next time you see a dolph . . . will you listen? You can hear them inside your head. Not words . . . just stuff. . . ." He flushed because it sounded lame and there wasn't any way to say it better.

"You're worse than Brandt." She laughed, but there was a thoughtful look on her face as she walked away.

She hadn't gotten angry, at least. Brandt had been wrong about her temper. Darin wondered if she would listen, next time she saw one. He jumped as someone touched his shoulder, spun around to find Brandt behind him. "Easy, kid." He grinned. "I had a feeling that you'd be down here early. We might as well go out. Go signal the crane operator, and let's get these boats ready to launch."

"You bet," Darin said and ran to wave at the operator. As he walked back to the boats, it occurred to him that Brandt must have been close enough to overhear his exchange with Rena.

He didn't say anything about it. He watched intently as Darin prepared both boats for launch and hooked them onto the cables. "Next time you can get both boats ready before I get down here," he said crisply. "You don't forget a thing, do you?" He reached out suddenly and caught Darin's chin, turning his face so that the light from the open bay shone full on it. "Your uncle?" he asked in a quiet tone.

Darin had almost forgotten about last night, but Brandt's frown made the new bruise throb. Darin nodded stiffly, not wanting Brandt to ask, not wanting to tell him.

Brandt let go of his chin and sighed. "Let's hit the water. Lia likes you," he added in an unexpected nonsequitur. "Hurry up."

Lia likes you. It hadn't been a dream—none of it. Darin walked beside the boats as they crept along beneath the overhead track. Close to the ladder near the big bay doors, Scully hurried past on the heels of a doryman. Bent beneath the box he was carrying on his back, he bared his teeth at Darin and flipped him off.

Hatred showed openly on Scully's face, this time. Darin looked after him, wondering why. Because Darin had the chance to become a doryman now? He moved his shoulders uneasily, smelling trouble like you'd smell a storm coming.

"There's always a price," Brandt said softly. "Success always costs. At some point you find yourself weighing it, deciding if it's worth that price." He looked down at Darin. "Sometimes it's a hard choice. Remember that when the time comes, okay?"

Brandt believed in him; believed he would succeed. Emotion filled Darin in an unexpected rush, bursting up from a dark locked-away space inside him, cracking something hard and shattering it to bits. He looked up at *The Lady*, fixing his eyes on her, tears burning behind his eyelids. Because Brandt talked as if Darin mattered to him. He couldn't remember mattering to anyone, like that.

"Nice job," Brandt said as Darin lowered *The Lady* gently onto the launch deck.

"Thanks," Darin whispered, and the tremor in his voice made him

blush. Brandt didn't seem to notice.

This time the crane operator extended the breakwater and lowered Darin's collie into the water without the slightest jar. He and Brandt headed straight for the blue fertile world of the shelf. Today it was fun. The collie was beginning to feel like a part of his body. He circled and dived the way you would reach for a glass of water—without having to think about *how* to reach.

"Fish," Brandt said suddenly.

They were swooping in and around spires of Giant coral and Darin was practicing reaching and grabbing with his mechanical arms. And there were fish all around, but they were all circled with red on his goggles. But Brandt would know and Darin reacted instantly, peeling away from a twisted helix of orange coral and kicking the collie into a sprint after *The Lady*. He circled out to the right and ahead of her, even though there were no green-lined fish on his screen. Because suddenly he *knew* there were legal fish here, knew it as surely as if he could see them on his screen.

Just before doubt slowed his confident rush they appeared—big fish, at least a dozen of them. They swam together in a tight school and Darin grinned because every one was ringed with green. And now, neon blue as Brandt targeted them for him. Beyond them, Darin caught a glimpse of a pale shadow. A white dolphin.

"Nu-cod." Brandt's voice was pleased in his ears. "Not many. No wonder the scouts missed them. Circle out and use your wand, just like we practiced. They're a freshmarket species." Brandt couldn't keep the excitement out of his voice. "If we get all of them, I'll rank first in freshmarkets for the year so far."

Darin's heart was beating fast because this was for real. He let his breath out slowly, trying for calm, afraid he'd blow it. Circling out, his wand on low power, he dodged spires and turrets of coral, trying to *be* the fish, feel what they were going to do before they did it. They were so beautiful—sleek and scaled, muscled and sculpted for this watery universe, and he loved them for it, not like he loved Brandt, but it was love anyway. And suddenly it worked. He was fish and himself and as they turned in perfect unison, he turned with them, wand broadcasting so that they veered again, darting straight into Brandt's extended net-arms. In a flash, he had scooped them into the gaping maw of *The Lady*. One fish managed to double back at the last second, ducking the sweep of Brandt's netted fingers, but they only lost that one.

"Yes!" Brandt was exultant as the meshes of his purse net trapped them. "I knew you'd do fine once you relaxed." His grin was almost audible. "Let's get these babies back to *The Fancy's* tank quick, before they get too battered."

Darin banked off and swung in beside *The Lady*, so that he could see Brandt dimly behind the polyglass of *The Lady's* cockpit. "The white dolphin told us the fish were there, didn't it?" he asked.

Behind the polyglass, Brandt moved sharply, as if he'd turned to stare out at Darin in his collie. "I think so," he said, and there was an odd reluctance in his tone. "Maybe."

"It was like I knew where they were, and then I knew what they were going to do." Still flushed with excitement, Darin ignored Brandt's hesitant tone. "Why did they help us? Because you don't hunt them?"

"I don't know," Brandt said softly. "It just happens. Listen, this is between you and I, okay? Or we'll have every doryman on *The Fancy* out chasing dolphins. And if they don't hear them, they'll harpoon them."

"Sure," Darin said. But what if they *could* hear the dolphins? Darin frowned, but there had been a hint of warning in Brandt's tone. He fell back on his old rule of silence and concentrated on piloting the collie.

This time Brandt had fish to unload, so Darin had to hold the collie in position at *The Fancy's* side for some time. Finally the trapeze dropped for him and the operator lifted him smoothly. *The Lady* stood empty and dripping on the deck, but there was no sign of Brandt as Darin climbed out of the collie.

"He's down at the tank." The crane operator's voice boomed from a speaker. "He always transfers the freshmarkets himself. The ladder is forward, to starboard. No, there. Yeah, you got it. Don't hang around too long," he called after Darin. "I got another team coming in about a half hour."

Darin clattered down the ladder (shaped from steel that he'd cut from *The Fancy's* extra bulkheads?), and opened the small door at the end. Found Brandt standing on a narrow mesh platform above the surface of the holding tank. When *The Fancy* had been a warship this tank had held fuel for the smaller ships that escorted her. Now it held the fresh-market species until they could be flown live to the gourmet markets.

"They made a good weight." Brandt turned to grin at him. "Nice job, pilot."

Darin smiled at the praise, eyed Brandt. "I won't tell anybody," he said awkwardly. "But what if they *could* hear. . . ?"

"And if they couldn't?" Brandt stared into the swirling water of the tank. "They'd decide we're both crazy." His tone was light, but there was a shadow on his face.

That shadow silenced Darin's flip reply. To him, being called crazy wasn't much different from being called a loser, but nobody called Brandt a loser. He flexed his arm, staring at brown skin sliding over hard muscle. It didn't look much different from the pictures of monkeys that he had seen. They just had more hair. "We really haven't changed much," Darin said out loud. "Maybe we can't change." Like *The Fancy* couldn't

change, could only go on fishing, moving steel around from place to place, waiting for the reactors to grow old and die. He looked up into Brandt's light eyes. "Are the white dolphins tomorrow? Do you think they'll come after us?"

"I . . . I don't know." Brandt looked away. "I don't know what they are. Me, I'm just a doryman."

Darin shrugged. "We won't let them, anyway." His voice sounded rusty in his own ears. "We'll kill them. Because there's no limit on them."

"You're right," Brandt whispered. For an instant Brandt stared into the murky water of the tank and his expression was full of pain. Then he laughed, but it was a sad laugh. "You're a good collie pilot. Lia's working the tank today, but I don't see her around. She's probably down cleaning filters or monitoring water pH." He gave a jerky shrug, turned away from the tank. "Let's go get the boats stowed before Sam dumps Rena down on top of us." He paused as he dogged the tank's hatch closed behind him. "You could sleep on the cushions in our living room." His eyes met Darin's. "If you need a place to sleep. It's okay with Lia, too."

"Thank you." Darin had to push the words past the sudden swelling in his throat. "Thank you very much," he said, and went up on deck to clean every last drop of sea water from *The Lady* and her collie.

And afterward, he went home with Brandt to dinner. Brandt didn't even ask, he just waited by the elevator until Darin joined him. This time Lia wasn't home from her shift yet, so he helped Brandt fix the chowder and roll rice and pickled squid in strips of seaweed. Brandt chopped carrots into his chowder instead of the herbs Lia had used, and he gave Darin small orange peppers to slice thin. Then Lia arrived, laughing and wordless, smelling of soap, her hair still damp from a shower.

"Nice," she said, and touched Darin's cheek with warm playfulness as she sampled a few pepper slices from the plate he'd arranged them on.

Her conversation was getting easier to understand. Gesture, expression, and nuance filled in the gaps between her few slurred words. It occurred to Darin as he dipped crusty pieces of bread into the steaming chowder that the freshmarket tank was a solo job. It only took one person to monitor water pH, remove any dying fish, and clean the filter system. She wouldn't have to talk much. Or be around other people much. He looked at her, seeing her suddenly with Scully's eyes—her pale skin, the tiny webs between her fingers. They would call her a mutation. Mutie. It was an ugly word and Darin put down his bread, his hunger suddenly gone.

Lia touched his wrist, and her strange eyes were full of understanding. It's all right, her touch said. Not your worry and not my pain. Unless you make it my pain.

So he smiled for her and finished his dinner. And after the dishes were clean, Brandt flashed recognition screens of legal species on the wall,

drilling him on identification, teaching him what each species ate and how it lived—solo or in schools, among the corals, or out in open water. He told Darin which were the old-time species, and which ones were new, like the nu-cods or the redmeat tunas. He never mentioned the white dolphins once.

They weren't licensed. There was no limit on them.

While they worked, Lia had taken her flute and quietly left the cabin. Darin stirred restlessly, his muscles twitching, as if her music tugged at his flesh even when he couldn't hear it.

"You've spent enough time on fish." Brandt grinned apologetically, winked. "Go ahead and take off. Unless you want to sit around and watch a vid with me."

Darin scrambled to his feet. "Thank you for dinner."

"There's always enough for a third person." Brandt nodded, his expression suddenly compassionate. "I keyed the door to your ID code," he said quietly. "The floor cushions are here if you want them."

"Thanks. . . ." There were no words to tell this man what he needed to say, so Darin turned and fled, released to the music, stabbed by his feelings.

He scrambled up the ladders like the primate he was, ran through the gardens, and dropped to his knees in the scupper. She stood below him, her hair whipping in the wind, twining the voice of the sea in her notes, playing the night. He crouched against the tool locker until she ended her music, until Brandt stepped out of the shadows to take her body in his arms. And again, as she left with him, she looked up at Darin. Then she and Brandt were gone and the deck was suddenly empty, as barren as the desert of the sea's surface.

Darin climbed down into the Fungus and walked slowly through the maze of passageways to his uncle's cabin door. And realized that he couldn't live here any more. He had never really lived here, had never been anything but a burden to his uncle. But there had been nowhere else to go. Slowly, he climbed down the ladders to the Gallery deck. The passageways were nearly deserted this time of night. Darin waited outside Brandt and Lia's door for a long time because they were making love. He could feel it through the door in the same way that his body had felt the music after Lia had gone up on deck.

And he couldn't go in there. Not while they were making love.

After awhile it was all right. His hand trembled as he entered his code because it might not open for him. He could believe that happening, had no reason not to. But the door opened, and that opening clenched his throat with the threat of tears again. They had left a light on for him, and a folded quilt lay on one of the cushions. Throat still tight, Darin tiptoed across the room, wrapped himself in the quilt and curled up on the cushions. They smelled of Brandt—subtly rank, warmly generous. The quilt

smelled of her—musky and strange. And finally the tears came and he couldn't stop them, couldn't understand where the pain came from or why, could only weep silently into the quilt so that they wouldn't hear.

That night set the pattern of his new life. By day he collied for Brandt, or helped him with maintenance or repairs to the boats when the scouts had reported no fish. But usually they went out, and almost always they found something.

The white dolphins found the fish for them, although Brandt seemed less and less willing to talk to Darin about it. Darin wondered about that reluctance, but if Brandt didn't want to talk about it, they wouldn't. It was Darin's gift to Brandt, that silence, one he'd never given to anyone before. But it left him plagued by twinges of guilt and anger that had no identifiable source and no outlet. In spite of that, he rejoiced in the way the collie was becoming an extension of his body. He rejoiced in the way he and Brandt worked as a team. Brandt praised him constantly to the other dorymen, so that he got offers of piloting jobs if he ever tired of being overworked by Brandt. Which made him grin.

He mattered to Brandt.

Darin ate with Brandt and Lia every night and watched vids or studied fish with Brandt afterward. But sooner or later Lia would go out with her flute and he would follow to hide in the shadows and swim the night sky on the sea of her music. And when Brandt came out to take her body in his arms, Darin would follow them back to the room. He would curl up outside the door and wait until they had finished making love before he would slip inside to wrap himself in the comfort of the cushions and quilt that smelled of him now.

And he needed comfort. At night, there was a small pain in his heart. It was compounded of Brandt's silence about the dolphins, of Lia's music, and the way in which Brandt took her in his arms. By day Darin was able to banish that worm of pain by working until he was exhausted, keeping the collie and *The Lady* polished and spotless, doing more than his share of the Hangar Deck maintenance chores that the dorymen and their pilots shared. But at night it sneaked back, and he dreamed of Lia, and sometimes of Brandt, although he could never remember the details in the morning.

Sometimes he stayed out on the flight deck long after Brandt and Lia had gone below. Sometimes, one or more white dolphins would surface. One night they sang, three of them, their voices pure and clear like the notes of a flute, weaving strange glimpses of vision and night into Darin's mind, leaving him silent and still as they finally sank beneath the waves.

Their singing reminded him of Lia's music. As if it was an echo of her flute. Or vice versa. And he understood finally why the white dolphins found fish for Brandt. Because he loved Lia.

That particular night, Lia and Brandt were still up when he came down to go to bed. They were standing in the main room when he walked in, their profiles tense. "No," Lia said, the words slurring even more than usual. "It can't happen."

"Are you so sure?" Brandt asked, and there was anguish in his voice. "Is it wrong to try?"

"You know what. . . ." Her anguished cry broke off as she caught sight of Darin.

And in that frozen instant as she turned to face him, head still full of the dolphin's clear singing, Darin saw Lia. Really *saw* her—the thick body, the webbed fingers, the dark eyes like windows into another, alien night.

You know what I am. That's what she had been about to say.

"We were just having a discussion," Brandt said, taking her hand, his face still flushed. "We're going to bed now."

"Sure," Darin said, too full of his vision to even feel awkward. His eyes met Lia's briefly. The grief there pierced him to the depths of his soul.

"I want a child," Brandt confided to him next day. They had come in with a decent catch of squid and were stowing the boats. "Is it so wrong?" He looked up from where he was checking *The Lady's* tiedown. "To want children, I mean?"

Trapped between Brandt's needling and the memory of Lia's grief, Darin couldn't speak. What about me? he wanted to cry. And felt immediately ashamed, because what was he to Brandt except a collie pilot? He felt his cheeks getting hot.

"I was born on *The Fancy*," Brandt's eyes were on the blue sky beyond the hangar's open doors. "I was so sure of myself when I left her, so sure that I could find the bigger future that I thought I needed. Ashore . . . I found out how little we matter. You die and you're gone. Just as if you'd never existed. Life is so fragile," Brandt said softly. "I don't want to leave . . . nothing behind."

Darin reached out hesitantly, put a hand on Brandt's shoulder. You won't leave nothing behind, he wanted to say. I'll remember you. Always. And Lia will. Other people, too. It wasn't what Brandt wanted and the words remained buried inside him.

Brandt gave him a crooked smile. "You're a good friend," he said.

They walked out onto the launch deck, and leaned together on the rail. The sun was setting in a wash of gold and the air was thick and still. It acted as a magnifying glass as he went over to lean against the rail beside Brandt. Every shred of foam on the slow swell, every floating scrap of weed or sodden gull feather stood out sharp and clear, almost surreal in the strange light.

"Weather coming," Brandt said, and sighed.

"You're the best doryman on *The Fancy*," Darin looked over at him, of-

fering what he could. "The very best."

"I am." Brandt sighed. "I work at it. As you know." He smiled wryly and turned away from the rail. "Let's go get dinner."

Lia got home at the same time as they did, so they fixed dinner together, all three in the kitchen at the same time. Brandt told about their day and speculated about the upcoming storm as he stirred the chowder. He didn't talk about children or mortality. Lia laughed and smiled, but there was a subdued feeling to her. A reef of unspoken words lay beneath the shallow water of their conversation. All three of them were navigating carefully around it. Darin carried the pot of chowder to the table, setting the heavy pot on the enamel tile that protected the table top. The blue enamel looked depthless tonight, its color the perfect blue of a calm ocean the day before a storm.

Brandt had added small green flower buds to the chowder tonight. They had a spicy taste that lingered on his tongue. Even so, Darin couldn't eat much. The tension between Brandt and Lia filled him with uneasiness and a restless longing for something—he didn't know what.

For once, Brandt didn't want to study fish. So Darin excused himself and left right after dinner—almost on Lia's heels as she went topside to play her flute. Brandt smiled and lifted a hand as Darin slipped out the door. And Darin wondered if Brandt knew that he went up on deck to listen to Lia's music every night. And if it would bother him. He wasn't sure he could stop listening even if it did. The sound of her flute reached for him tonight, hurrying his feet on the ladder, so that he slipped once, hung for a second only by his hands. It drew him through the gardens, an almost tangible presence on the still, crystal air.

He didn't hide tonight. Instead, he perched precariously on the lip of the scupper, the gritty surface rough beneath his palms, heart thudding against his ribs as he watched her profile against the dark merger of sea and stars. The music rose, wandering through minor keys, graced with the cry of gulls and the soft whisper of surf so clear that if he closed his eyes, he could see it; a beach of black pebbles bordered by gray cliffs and the night sea, bright with the light of the full moon.

A girl waded into the surf. She had fair hair and carried a spray of blooming beach plum in one hand. Beyond the gentle breakers, waist deep in the slow swell crowned with lacy foam, she stopped. A pale shape rose out of the water, manlike and fishlike at the same time—*of the sea*—a white dolph, strangely human in the moonlight. And the girl laughed and dropped the plum branches into the water, and she held on to the dolph's back, and they swam together out beyond the cove, vanishing in the swell of the open sea.

Darin sighed and opened his eyes. And discovered that Lia had turned away from the sea. Her huge dark eyes were fixed on his face and she began to blow low, slow sensual notes. They touched him like long pale fin-

gers, exploring, enticing, so that he shivered, breathing as hard as if he'd been running, an erection rising in his pants. A high tremolo was the brush of her lips on his, and a rippling cascade of minors combed her fingers through his thick dark hair. The notes hummed, lower, richer, their touch like hot velvet on his skin, sweeter than the honey he'd once tasted, but sad, too. That sensual grief hummed through his flesh, twisting into a song of pleading. "Yes," he gasped, not sure what she had asked or what he had promised. And then he came—hunched in the scupper, without shame, filled with the heat of her music.

The notes trailed away like gentle fingers on his skin, like a benediction. He lifted his head, just as Brandt stepped into view below. This time he didn't open his arms. She didn't run to him. They stood silently, facing each other. Finally, Brandt held out his hand and slowly, slowly, Lia lowered the flute. Head held high, she stepped forward to take his hand, and raise it to her lips. Only then did he put his arm around her.

Together, just as always, they went back inside.

Perched on the scupper, Darin shivered in the rising wind. He had been able to see her face as she smiled at Brandt. It had been full of love. And of sorrow.

He didn't go to their cabin, couldn't tonight. Darin thought briefly of Uncle Jerry's cabin, but even if the door weren't locked against him, it was too late to ever go back there. So he curled up between two garden beds, out of the wind. Brandt wanted a child. His eyes ached, but no tears came. Love could be as tangled as a torn net. His hands were full of the threads, and he wasn't sure where any of them went.

Thin wandering notes pried their way into his unconscious—like the thin melody of a distant flute. Darin started to his feet thinking for one wild and wonderful instant that it was Lia, that she had come back to the sponson to play and everything was all right. And then, shivering in the first breath of the approaching storm, he realized that he was hearing a white dolphin singing.

The song echoed back Lia's sorrow.

Darin curled back into the space between the gardens, and the first dry sobs racked him.

In the morning Brandt came whistling to the boat with a satisfied and slightly dreamy air that spoke volumes to Darin and cranked the knot of jealousy in his heart tighter. It occurred to Darin for the first time that he wasn't sure who he was jealous of. Not once during the entire day did Brandt say anything about the night, or about Darin's absence from the cushions. That silence sank deep into Darin, twisting into a knot in his chest that was more tightly tangled than any torn net.

Not quite two months after the night Lia played for him, after a night

of wind and fitful rain, Brandt skipped down to *The Lady* grinning in a way Darin had never seen him grin. "We're going to have a baby," he said, and he seized Darin, danced him around in a circle in the dim light of the hangar bay. "We're going to have a son. Neither of us has had a kid yet, so it's okay. She told me he's going to be a boy."

"Congratulations," Darin said numbly, and he grinned to match Brandt's grin because that's what Brandt wanted from him.

But he drove the collie like a demon through the water, scattering fish, more clumsy and less graceful than he'd been on his first day in its hull. And if the white dolphins had fish to offer, neither he nor Brandt heard them offer any.

"Let's go in," Brandt said finally, and there was an edge of irritation in his voice that Darin had never heard there before.

"Whatever," he said, answering irritation with sullen obedience.

They returned to *The Fancy* in silence and the crane operator let them know with a lift of his eyebrows that he hadn't expected them back so soon, that they were violating their own rules.

"What's your problem?" Brandt backed him against the wet hull of the collie as Darin climbed out. "You're my fingers, Darin. You crippled us, today. So tell me why."

There was anger in his tone, but there was worry there, too. That note of worry gutted Darin's anger and made him drop his eyes. "I'm sorry," he said, and his voice caught on the words, because they were true. "I'm not sure . . . I don't know what was eating me." He gave a jerky, apologetic shrug. "I won't let it happen again."

"Hey, it's okay." Brandt's smile was equally apologetic. "You're so good I expect you to be perfect one hundred percent of the time." He palmed Darin's cheek gently, playfully. "Hey, I'm having trouble focusing anyway. We've been together a long time, Lia and I. I thought she'd never . . . I mean," he shrugged. "I think she was scared. Because of her . . . mutations. But so what? They're not so terrible, and he might not inherit them anyway."

Darin felt the blood draining from his face. "What do you mean, mutations?" The word sounded so *broken*.

"Well, her fingers." Brandt looked annoyed and uncomfortable. "And she's got some skeletal . . ."

"She's not a mutation." Darin stared aghast into Brandt's face because he *knew*, he had to know. "She's part dolphin, that's all."

"No!" Brandt's nostrils flared and he jerked as if Darin had stuck a knife into him. "Dolph are animals, not human. They're fish. Don't ever say that again," he hissed in a voice Darin had never heard. "Do you hear me? The Board . . ." He turned and walked away, heading for the ladder that led down to the freshmarket tank.

Stunned, Darin stared after him. That was why the dolphins gave them

fish. Because of Lia. Her secret had been a shared thing between them, like her music and her wordless language.

Either he was wrong—or Brandt had just betrayed that. I'm *not* wrong, Darin thought bleakly.

"You gonna get your boats off my deck?" the operator asked him over his loudspeaker. "I got more boats to trap."

"Sure," Darin said. He took a half step toward the ladder, then turned back and picked up the hose. For the first time, Brandt let him do all the work, reappearing only to check that *The Lady* and her collie were locked into their berths. And then he walked off toward the elevator alone, the tight line of his shoulders and his brisk walk excluding Darin.

Another first.

Darin glowered at a smear of salt on *The Lady's* hull. He turned away, heading for the ladder. But after only a few steps he went back and polished every trace of salt from her hull.

For the first time, he had no place to go. Darin took the ladder down instead of up—down to the Mess Deck, with its labyrinth of shops, food stands, simulators, and VR parlors. Mess was always crowded with people filling up their off-shift time—for a price. This was Scully's turf. This was where Uncle Jerry went to lose money in the Mah-Jongg parlor. Darin walked along narrow passageways, peering into shop fronts, not really seeing the merchandise that was on display. An old lady was selling skewers of broiled vegetables and fish. Darin's stomach growled as he caught a whiff of the food, so he stopped and bought one. She stared at him shrewdly and the corner of her lip lifted.

"Having fun, collie pilot?" she asked, and then cackled as if she'd made a wonderful joke. "What's the price of Brandt's yanking you out of the bilge? His hand in your pants? He got tired of his dryland mutie?"

Darin stared at her, his mouth dry. "He's not . . . I mean," he struggled for coherence, his face flaming. "Go to hell, bitch," he said, too late for his sneer to come across as anything but confirmation.

He tossed the skewer onto the floor at her feet and stalked on, scalded by her cackle of hilarity. It felt as if everyone was looking at him, everyone was snickering. Darin kept his eyes front, pushing blindly ahead, nearly ran smack into the bulkhead at the end of the passageway.

Dryland mutie. The words burned like acid. Before this afternoon they would have had no meaning—would have been nothing more than a bit of petty ugliness. Squeezed by sudden claustrophobia, Darin ran back the way he had come, shoving through the crowd as he made his way to the ladders. People swore at him as he brushed past, but their words were as meaningless as the cries of the gulls.

He climbed without stopping, clear up to the Garden Deck, his feet pounding a clanging drumbeat of desperation on the treads. A shadow flickered at the edge of his vision—someone behind him on the ladder—

but he didn't turn around to look. He levered himself over the top of the ladder, brushed past ripening corn stalks, dodged down an intersecting aisle. He wasn't going anywhere. He was just running away.

Like Brandt had run? First from *The Fancy*, then from the land. And now . . . from Lia? Darin slowed as he neared the tool locker, gasping for breath, his lungs on fire. The pain helped. The first star glittered above the roof of the tool locker. Darin clenched his teeth and veered away. Lia wouldn't be down there. She would be inside, fixing dinner with Brandt, or maybe eating by now. Darin wondered if they had even noticed that he wasn't there, and the hurt inside him grew to a pain so bad that he stumbled, catching himself on the frame of a garden bed.

That shadow moved at the edge of his vision, and this time it moved fast—so fast that he spun around, his muscles reacting even before his brain had registered *threat*. He caught a glimpse of Scully's pale face twisted into a mask of hatred and then he slammed into Darin's chest, knocking him back across the frame of the bed, fists pounding at Darin's face and stomach.

The breath blasted from Darin's lungs and he twisted desperately, but Scully had him pinned, back bent across the edge of the bed. He grabbed Darin by the hair, banged his head against the metal bed wall. Red light exploded in Darin's vision and his muscles went slack for a moment.

"You think you're such hot stuff, you bilge-slime," Scully hissed in his ear. "I'll throw you over the side and nobody'll ever know. That should have been my collie, not yours. I was always better than you on the sims." He slammed Darin's head against the metal again. "You stinking loser. You *whore*."

"Yeah . . . I'm a loser. So . . . are you." Rage fountained through Darin, driving back the darkness that was crowding into the edges of his vision. "We're all losers," he yelled into Scully's face and laughed, because Brandt had accepted it—loser—had accepted it because . . .

. . . because he was afraid.

With a strangled cry, Darin jerked his feet up and kicked Scully. He tumbled backward, arms flailing, and fell into the next garden bed. The odor of mint rose, thick enough to make Darin gag. He lunged to his feet and grabbed Scully by the shirt, hauling him from the crushed plants as if he weighed nothing, flinging him back against the rail. Beyond lay darkness, a forty meter drop to the hard hard water. Death sang a shrill seductive note in Darin's head, and he tipped Scully farther out over the drop.

"Don't!" Scully gasped, clutching his wrists. "Darin, please . . ."

Darin's muscles bunched. Yeah, a tiny voice whispered in his head. Kill Scully right here. The Board would put him ashore tomorrow. Lia, Brandt, the baby—none of them would matter. Nothing would matter. Darin stared into Scully's terrified, hating face. Saw his own face reflect-

ed in the pupils of Scully's eyes, tiny and perfect. With a smothered groan, he pulled Scully back onboard. Someone reached past him, grabbed Scully and yanked him away from the rail. Brandt. Darin stared numbly at him as Scully scrambled to his feet.

"Get out of here," Brandt told Scully coldly.

"He tried to kill me." Scully wiped his bloody mouth on his arm, face twisting. "The fucker tried to kill me. I'll tell the Board, and they'll put you ashore," he screamed at Darin.

"I saw it all." Brandt's tone was icy. "Did you hear me? The whole thing. Now get out of here or *you'll* go ashore."

Scully scurried off toward the elevator with a backward glance of hatred that might have been directed at either Darin or Brandt.

"He's right," Darin whispered. He looked down at his hands. The echoes of that shrill song of death twisted his guts with nausea. "Maybe I should go ashore," he said dully.

"No." Brandt put his arm around Darin's shoulder. "I'm . . . I'm sorry," he said hoarsely. "For this afternoon. Is it . . . Lia? Being pregnant?"

"No," Darin whispered. "Yes. I don't know."

"I . . . we'd talked about legally adopting you, you know. We can still do it." Brandt's words were low and hurried. "This is the first time Lia . . . I mean we're each entitled to a child, and I don't want one with someone else. So I could adopt you. And then you could inherit *The Lady* legally. Our . . . our son might not want . . ."

"Stop!" The raw sound of pain in that single syllable startled them both. "It's not *The Lady*. I don't want *The Lady*," he cried raggedly. "She's yours."

"I don't . . . understand," Brandt said slowly.

"Why?" Darin's voice trembled. "Why did you teach me to pilot your colie? Why did you take me in?"

For several moments Brandt stared silently into the darkness beyond *The Fancy's* stern. "When I heard you in front of the Board . . . you sounded like I did. Long ago, before I left." He didn't take his eyes from that invisible horizon. "I almost died on shore. It was a mistake . . . going there. We're not of the land anymore. It was like . . . seeing myself again." He smiled finally, his eyes on Darin's face. "You're a good colie pilot and a good friend, Darin. And I'd like you to have *The Lady* one day. If you want her."

"I don't know," Darin whispered, choked by the need in Brandt's eyes. "Did you meet Lia then? Ashore?"

"Yes." Brandt looked away. "She was . . . living by herself. On the coast. I . . . lived there for awhile."

Darin sighed. "Hey, I'm okay now." He made his voice light because Brandt wanted him to be all right, wanted everything to be okay. "I . . . I just kind of lost it with Scully." He looked away, the shallow lying words

bitter on his tongue. "It was old business and it's over. It won't ever happen again."

"I'm glad." Brandt squeezed his arm, his face full of warmth, full of gratitude. "You're important, Darin. To both of us."

Darin bent his head, his throat aching, wondering if he was nothing but a ghost—an echo of Brandt's youth. And he wondered how that fifteen year old kid who had hidden behind the tool locker to look at the horizon would think of Brandt, now. Maybe Brandt wondered, too.

"Are you hurt?" Brandt put his arm around him, warm in the chilly breeze, full of strength. "You're bleeding."

Darin touched the matted hair where his head had hit the edge of the garden bed. "I'm okay," he lied.

"Come on down and we'll get you cleaned up." Brandt sounded relieved, and he kept his arm around him as he led Darin back toward the ladder. "We waited dinner for you."

"Thanks," Darin whispered, defeated, silenced. And knew that he would have to go ashore, that he couldn't stay here after Lia's baby was born. Brandt's son. "You shouldn't have waited."

The weeks passed. Darin and Brandt worked together daily as *The Fancy* hit fertile waters, talking and joking as if nothing had happened. Because Brandt wanted it that way. At night they went home to eat chowder from the pot on its blue tile. Brandt watched his vids, and on the surface nothing had changed.

But things *had* changed. When Darin looked into Lia's dark eyes he saw a terrible grief there. And realized suddenly what this child would do to her. Where she had been wonderful—child of dolph and human woman—now she would be merely human. An imperfect human at that. This son would transform her. And he wondered if that was why she hadn't wanted this child. And if she would play her flute again after the birth. He didn't think so.

He didn't go up to the Garden deck to listen to her any more. After dinner Darin sat on the sofa with Brandt and watched vids that he never remembered the next morning. He would sit with his nails digging into his flesh, resisting the tug of Lia's unheard flute music, his face tranquil. Because that was the only gift he could give Brandt. And he couldn't bear to hear her grieving.

And when Brandt went out to bring her in, then Darin went up onto the Garden deck. He sat in his spot with his feet dangling over the cliff of *The Fancy's* side. And every night the white dolphins would surface—some fishlike, some almost human in outline. And they would sing to him with Lia's grieving flute-voice—the voice that might die in a few more weeks. And he wasn't getting enough sleep and it showed in the hollows beneath his cheekbones, but Brandt didn't notice. He had eyes only for Lia's

swelling belly, the son growing inside her.

Immortality, Darin thought bitterly. Or was this child absolution? This was the son who would bind him forever to the closed circle of *The Fancy's* future, turn Lia forever into a mutie.

In the sea, it was Darin who found the fish now. Because Brandt could no longer hear the white dolphins' voices. That hurt Darin more than anything. Perhaps the baby would change Brandt as much as Lia.

"If I put some money aside from my share," Brandt would tell Darin as they washed down *The Lady* and her collie at the end of the day, "I can pay for a new dory by the time Cass is old enough for one."

Cass. Brandt had already named the baby. Cass wasn't Lia's name for him. Darin knew it by the way she spread her hand across her swelling belly, the small translucent webs stretching tight between her fingers. He knew it by the way her face glowed with sadness and love. But for the first time Darin had ever witnessed, Brandt didn't understand her. Darin took to keeping his eyes on his plate at the table, because he wanted to tell Brandt and couldn't, could only keep silent.

He woke one night, not sure what had waked him, ears straining in the darkness. Silence filled the cabin, but he slipped from beneath the warm quilt, tugged by urgency. His feet took him to the stairs on their own, and he climbed to the Garden Deck, pulled by an invisible string.

Lia stood below him, poised above the cliff of *The Fancy's* side, white as a dolphin in the light of the waxing moon. Darin's breath caught in his throat and he clung there, wanting to call to her, afraid that he'd startle her and she would fall. As he clung to the scupper, she raised her flute to her lips and began to play.

Her music called, cried, pleaded with some god or goddess whose face was hidden in the darkness. Or maybe it only pleaded with the night, with the dark spaces of her own body. She was naked from the waist up, wearing a pair of loose pants whose waistband was tucked below her pregnancy. The moon spilled light across the taut curve of her breasts and belly, ran like liquid silver down her long hair.

And her music sobbed with a grief that tore at Darin. But for the first time, he couldn't understand her. And then she turned suddenly, graceful for all her bulk, and saw him even though he was hidden by darkness and the shadow of the tool locker. And now the notes touched him gently, appealing to him, reminding him of a promise he'd made months ago—a promise that he didn't understand. And he shuddered, tears scalding his cheeks because the note of love in the music pierced him.

Love for Brandt. He broke and ran finally, because he couldn't listen any more. He ran across the deck and flung himself down the ladder, clear down to the Hangar Deck. And took refuge in *The Lady's* cockpit.

He dreamed there, of white dolphins with eyes like windows into a night

sky above a strange sea. And the sound of Lia's flute and the notes of their singing blended and became indistinguishable. They trapped him like nets, those notes, that singing. And he cried in his sleep, but he couldn't wake.

It was human noise that woke him finally, the clang and thumps of dories and collies being unlocked, hooked, and craned out to launch. Stiff from sleeping in *The Lady's* seat, Darin stretched. The scouts must have called in a good sighting. And Brandt was late. Brandt was always the first one out when the scouts called in. A sudden fear shook Darin as he looked around the mostly empty bay. He started for the elevator, broke off and headed for the ladder, because he could climb faster than the elevator could rise.

On the Gallery Deck, their door opened to his code just like always. Darin took two steps into the room and stopped. The empty room yawned at him—the tiny kitchen counter clean and neat from last night, his quilt rumpled on the floor beside the cushions, where he'd tossed it when he'd waked. He peeked into their bedroom. The bed was empty, their sea-blue quilt tumbled onto the floor.

She would be in sick bay, in the birthing room. Stiff-legged and slow he walked out into the main room, picked up his quilt and folded it neatly. He could go there. Brandt would be with her, but he could sit outside, wait for Brandt to come out and announce his son. He went topside instead. Gray clouds tumbled the sky to the southwest and the wind whipped at his hair, raising white water against the sides of *The Fancy*. He walked out to his perch, oblivious, and squatted there, his eyes on the distant horizon. The rising wind whistled with the sound of her flute, with the sound of the dolphins' singing.

He waited for Brandt.

Brandt didn't come until dark. By then it was raining, a fine driving rain that swept across the deck in misty sheets. He crossed the deck slowly, moving like an old man, walked directly up to Darin, as if it was broad daylight, as if he had Lia's night vision or knew that Darin would be here. Here where they had first met, where Darin had listened to Lia's music. He stopped in front of Darin and stood silent as the seconds ticked away, his face in shadow, looking down to where Darin crouched against the wall. He held a bundle in his arms, wrapped in a pale blue blanket, and there was a carryall slung over his shoulder.

"She died," he whispered at last.

Darin didn't move, didn't speak. He had known for hours now, as if the wind had whistled it to him with her only voice. Even if she had lived . . . she would have died. Part of her. The part that mattered. He had heard it in her music last night—her dying. Out here in the rainy darkness he had understood. Love. It could trap you like a purse net, drown you in its meshes. Slowly, stiffly, he got to his feet, discovered with a thrill of shock

that he was almost as tall as Brandt. As if he had been growing. Or as if Brandt had shrunk.

"The baby's . . . not normal." Brandt looked down at the silent bundle in his arms.

The baby. Not Cass. Not *my* son.

"I can . . . send him ashore. There are . . . places for them. Children. Like that." Brandt's shoulders moved as if he was struggling for words. "It would be best," he said clearly. "The Board would agree."

Uncle Jerry had kept him, reluctantly perhaps, but he had taken Darin on to save him from a place like that. Darin looked at Brandt and felt . . . pity. "No," he said softly, and straightened his shoulders, standing tall even though he was shivering. "You can't do that."

Brandt wouldn't look at him.

She loved you. He didn't say that. You'll die if you do this. He didn't say that either. "I'll take care of him." That was what he said. "All the time."

"How will you . . . you can't pilot a collie if you're baby sitting. I'll have to get someone else."

Darin listened to that faint angry protest, stabbed to the heart by it. "If I can't find a place here, they'll put me ashore. Are you going to do that to us?"

Us. Brandt winced. Then his shoulders slumped, spine curving in defeat. "He won't . . . his legs . . ." Fear echoed in his voice, thin and raw. "It's too much for a fifteen year old kid," he said desperately.

Darin looked into his shadowed face, unsayable words crowding his throat: I have to do this—for you, not just for her. Because she died and if you do this, if you send her son away, you'll die, too, into the empty future that you saw and I see. And maybe the dolphs started out as human once, and maybe they started out as animals, but whatever, they're change, and we have to change, Brandt, or we'll all die.

And he is your son.

And Darin's, too. That was what her music had meant, that night when he had come, crouched in the scupper.

"I can do it," was all he said.

Brandt nodded once, then stood still. Two meters of space separated them. Darin looked across it, realizing that perhaps that gap was wider than the ocean, that he might never cross it in this life.

"You were in love with her, weren't you?" Brandt asked bitterly. "That's why you're doing this."

"No." Darin's laugh cracked and broke. "I wasn't in love with her." Love. It could drown you in its meshes.

He was drowning.

The bundle in Brandt's arms whimpered. His shoulders jerked and he stepped forward. Without a word he held it out. Slowly, Darin reached for it. Took it—him—his fingers brushing Brandt's. Then Brandt dumped

the carryall onto the wet deck, turned and walked quickly aft into the darkness.

The baby weighed a lot. Darin turned a fold of blanket back and looked down at his pale face. It looked squashed, and his eyes were slits, tightly closed. Raindrops dewed the wisps of his fine hair. I can't do this, Darin thought in panic, and his heart began to pound. I don't know how.

The baby's eyes opened. They were dark—windows into another, different night. Lia's eyes. A dolphin's eyes. He smiled, revealing pink, toothless gums, those dark eyes fixing on Darin's face.

Darin smiled back. The fear was still there but it wasn't panic anymore. Just fear. "I can handle you," he told the baby. He could ask. It would be hard, but someone would tell him what to do. He could pay someone to watch him while he fished with Brandt. He'd never save enough for his own dory but . . . that didn't matter. He straightened his shoulders with an effort, rocked the baby gently, hesitantly. "Don't worry, kid," he said. "We'll do it."

The baby gurgled, fists clenched tight, moving almost but not quite randomly. He nuzzled Darin's chest, nudging warm and moist against him, making wet sucking noises. Hungry. The rain had stopped. Darin fished in the carryall, found a bottle full of milk or formula or whatever they had given Brandt in the sickbay.

Awkwardly he stuck the nipple into the baby's mouth. He seized it and sucked, his eyes on Darin's face again. Slowly, Darin unfolded the blanket that wrapped the baby. Slowly, slowly he folded it back. His tiny nipples were pink against the white skin of his chest. They had put a diaper on him, tucked it carefully below the raw stump of his navel. Below the bulky too-large folds of cloth, the baby's legs kicked rhythmically.

They were thick and they didn't bend much at the knee. His toes were way too long and the folds of webbing bulged between them, pale and translucent. He wasn't going to walk on those feet.

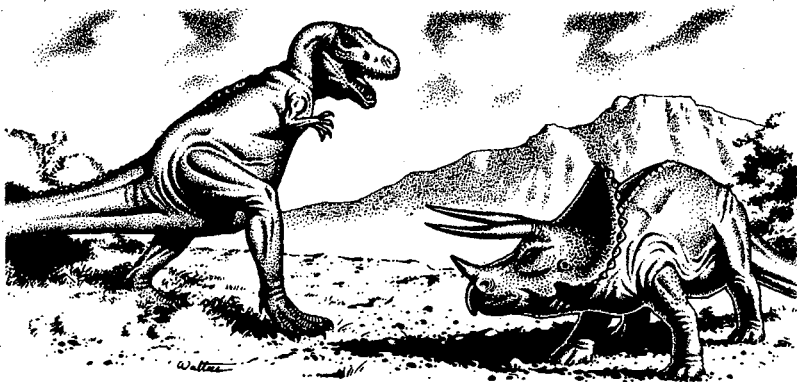
Human. Dolphin. Other. The moon gleamed through a rent in the clouds. Out on the water a pale shape rose, singing a flute-song of welcome to the night. What could we become if we worked together? Darin asked it silently. The white dolphins were *of* the sea. Maybe . . . maybe the people on the factory ships could change. Like the people on the platforms had changed. But there would have to be a beginning. A halfway point between *us* and *other*.

Lia had been in between, but she had given in to Brandt's fear and let him pretend that she wasn't. Maybe, trapped between the desert of land and sea, Brandt could only be *of The Fancy*. The wind plastered Darin's wet clothes against his skin and he began to shiver. "They won't be able to pretend," he whispered to the baby. Next time Rena tried to harpoon a white dolphin she would see his face. The baby blinked up at Darin, still sucking, his dark eyes full of another, other, night. "You're ours," Darin

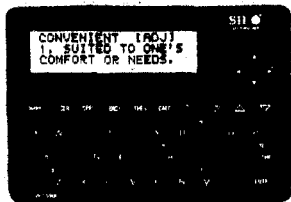
murmured to him. "Mine and Brandt's both." Maybe one day he could tell Brandt about the night Lia had played, make Brandt understand.

More shapes were rising all along *The Fancy*, more dolphs than he had ever seen at one time. Us, or other, they were *change*. Their singing wove night and sea together, and there was welcome in it. For Lia's son. And for him. Darin wasn't shivering any more, wasn't even cold. He listened to their singing and some of the emptiness inside him filled. Holding their son close, he waited for the dolphs to tell him the baby's name.

They would tell him, and he would sing it to Brandt in the morning, when he came down to *The Lady*. ●



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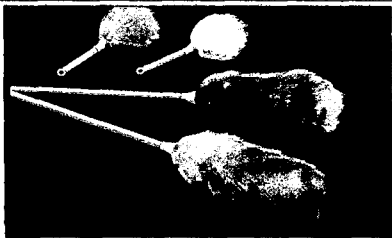


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Leslie What

HOW TO FEED YOUR INNER TROLL

Leslie What has sold her fiction to *Asimov's*, *F&SF*, *Hysteria*, *Realms of Fantasy*, and *Pulphouse*. She is a columnist and contributing writer for the *Eugene Weekly*, and for fun—and sometimes profit—she plays Mah-Jongg with a group of ladies who call themselves the “Oy Luck Club.”

Illustration by Steve Cavallo

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Herschel Minkowitz had barely finished writing the midterm exam for his non-Euclidian geometry class when someone knocked at the door. He stroked his beard, considering whether or not to answer. Most likely, those drunken carolers from 16B were at it again, or, worse yet, it could be that the *goyim** from the United Way had come to collect. A sense of dread washed through him as he squinted to see the clock. "Oy!" he said—nearly time for *Jeopardy*!

He downed a Tums, quickly followed by another. Tonight was the first night of the Tournament of Champions, and Herschel had yet to make his final pass through the encyclopedia. The rapping persisted, annoying as an alarm.

The noise reminded Herschel of his dear *bubbe*, who used to *potch* him on the *tochis* to remind him that he'd forgotten something important. His angst had multiplied to a point where he could stand it no longer. With a longing glance at the remote control above the television, Herschel hurried across the living room to answer the door. Through the peephole he saw a furry blue triangle. "Who's there, already?" Herschel asked. There was no reply, but the blue fur wriggled. The color seemed so reassuringly familiar that Herschel opened the door part way. "Whaddaya want?" he asked, peering through the crack.

A *zaftig* little troll wearing powder-blue pajamas pushed past him and strode toward the Barcalounger that Herschel's *bubbe* had left him the year she went into the nursing home. The troll plopped into the seat cushion, making the Naugahyde squeal. It rolled up its sleeves, exposing stubby arms that were chalky as baking powder biscuits. Each hand had three short fingers, ruddy and fat as sausages. The troll reached down to pull the lever and let out the hassock. Tufts of blue fur sprouted from each of its chubby little toes.

"Comfy, isn't it?" said Herschel. As a boy he'd sat on Bubbe's lap, eating noodle kugle while the two watched *What's My Line*? How he longed to see his grandmother again!

The troll growled, "Figgy pudding!" with a trace of a Brooklyn accent. "Won't go till I get some!" It snapped its fingers and a blue ceramic mixing bowl appeared in its lap.

Herschel glanced down the hall, wondering where his uninvited guest had come from. Every door was closed, though he heard someone blaring the rap version of "Carol of the Bells" at sonic-boom volume. Before the odor of fish frying in a neighboring apartment could waft close enough to infect his whiskers, Herschel shut the door.

"Figgy pudding!" said the troll, a little louder. It pulled a blue wad of crumpled tissues from the between the seat cushions and tossed them to the carpet. "Want it *now*."

*See "Glossary for the Goyim" on page 64.

GLOSSARY FOR THE GOYIM

Bubbe: (Pronounced bub-bee) An affectionate term for your grandmother.

Bubkes: (Pronounced sort of like that football guy.) Super-important. NOT! **Channukah:**

(Pronounced with the guttural "ch" a cat makes when coughing up a furball.) The Jewish festival celebrating fried foods, light, and freedom.

Dybbuk: (Pronounced dib-book) Kind of like a Santa, only scary.

Fartootst: (Pronounced just like it sounds, sorry.) Feeling kinda crazy.

Flayshig: Flesh. See Terry Bisson's "They're Made Out of Meat."

Goyim: (Other) nations. For the purpose of this story, if you need to ask, you can take it that this means you.

Kvetch: To whine or complain, frequently and with passion.

Suddenly, Herschel remembered. "Oy!" he said, slapping his head. Bubbe's birthday! And he'd forgotten to send so much as a card.

The troll hoisted its bowl above its head. "Figgy pudding! Figgy pudding!"

Herschel grew annoyed. "Are you *fartootst*? I don't know from figgy pudding," he said.

The troll snarled, baring yellow fangs. "Want it *now*!"

This was getting somewhat scary. Perhaps the troll was a *dybbuk*. Bubbe had warned him about such evil spirits, whom she'd often encountered back in the old country. Yet this *dybbuk* seemed more Smurf than demon, and Herschel found it difficult to take the little creature altogether seriously.

"Figgy pudding! Figgy pudding!" The troll jumped up and down on the Barcalounger. Plaster chunks fell like a plague of hail from the ceiling.

"No jumping on the furniture," Herschel said, but the troll didn't listen. In desperation, Herschel dialed his mother.

"Nu?" she answered. He heard the click of Mah-Jongg tiles in the background.

"Ma," Herschel said.

"You married, yet?"

"Do you have to ask every day?"

"So why are you calling on game night? Don't tell me you forgot your grandmother's birthday? And her all alone for the holidays."

"Cut it out, Ma," Herschel said. He felt guilty enough already. "It's just that this furry little troll stopped by and it wants me to make it some figgy pudding and I'm in a big hurry to watch my show. You got any recipes?"

"Figgy pudding, my *tochis*! What are you, fartootst? This is no accident that you're entertaining your inner troll at this time of

the year," she said. He heard her cover the phone with her hand. "Five Crack," she yelled, as she discarded a tile.

"You still there, Ma? Whaddaya mean, 'inner troll'?"

"Your inner *nudzh*, your inner *kvetch*, your inner nag. Don't you remember him from childhood?" she said. "He's like an imaginary friend who's been recruited by the IRS. I wonder if your grandmother knows about this?" She sighed. "Hersh, babe. I'm telling you. There's more to life than *Jeopardy!* You're thirty-five years old. Don't you think it's time to feed the troll?" Yet being his mother, she agreed to check for a recipe when the game ended.

She called him back quickly. "Wall game," she said, meaning that nobody had won. Herschel heard her flip through the pages of her cookbook. "Let's see here. . . Fat, rendered, and grebenes. Fish balls. Hm. I'll try puddings. *Flayshig* Pudding? That it?"

"I don't think so," he said warily.

"So hire a caterer, it's not good enough," she said. "Lighten up—it's almost *Chan-nukah*. Say, I gotta go. Call me tomorrow and we'll do *latkes*."

"Sure, Ma," Herschel said, sorry he had bothered calling her in the first place. "Tomorrow." He said goodbye, then plodded to his tiny kitchen and opened his refrigerator. "I could bake you maybe some schmaltz herring," he called.

"Figgy pudding! Figgy pudding!" screamed the troll. The floor began to quake, and Herschel rushed out with a box of melba toast, hoping that would do. He set the box on the arm rest beside the troll.

"If you want, I've got dry curd cottage cheese," Herschel said. "Low in calories. Good for the skin."

The troll snapped his fangs at the air and hurled the melba toast across the room.

Latkes: (Pronounced Lot-keys) Fried potato balls (so how else would you cook potato balls?) traditionally served on Channukah.

Nu?: (Pronounced as "New?") An all-purpose greeting like "Yo."

Nudzh: (The "u" as in Bush, pronounced nuhjdge) To nag or nudge with a passion.

Oy: Anagram of Yo. A two-letter word used in Scrabble. Five points.

Patch: A time-honored tradition, currently out of favor. The usual scenario involves a parent threatening to patch the child because of a disobedient act, a reprise of the disobedient act, the actual patch, and the child's questioning "Why did you patch me?"

Tochis: (Pronounced took-us) A behind.

Zaftig: The way we saw chubbiness before the times of eating disorders.

"Ouch," Herschel said. "Take it easy!" He downed another Tums, then offered one to the troll.

The troll batted its arm, knocking the roll of antacids from Herschel's grasp. "Figgy pudding," it said in a growl. "Want it now!"

Herschel began to wonder if he was in mortal danger. He backed away.

The troll reached between the Barcalounger cushions to pull out wads and wads of old tissues. Soon, the Barcalounger seemed adrift in a sea of blue. "Want it *now!* Want it *now!*" it screamed, then suddenly, the troll calmed down. It held up a three by five notecard. "Figgy Pudding!" it said. Herschel looked at the notecard, and saw Bubbe's noodle kugle recipe. So *that's* where she had hidden it!

"*Now!*" said the troll, thrusting forward both the notecard and its mixing bowl.

Herschel hurried to warm the oven. His hands were all aquiver, but he managed to beat the eggs until silky, then start the noodles. When the noodles were soft he added raisins, lemon juice, almonds, and brown sugar, and, to that, cinnamon and just a pinch of nutmeg. A few stewed prunes were left from breakfast, and he added those as well. He set the timer, and slid the dish into the oven. Soon, the sweet smell of Bubbe's kugle filled the apartment. When the eggs were firm, Herschel scooped up a huge portion and brought it back to the troll.

The troll stuck its face down into its bowl to eat. It paused and looked up with a satisfied smile on its face. "Figgy Pudding!" it said. "We wish you," but Herschel, thinking of his grandmother, was so distracted that he paid it no attention.

"We *wish* you," it said, beginning to sound irritated.

"I sure wish my Bubbe was here," Herschel said.

The troll licked its nose with the tip of its tongue. It nodded, then jumped up to its feet and turned around thrice. It blinked hard, and, all at once—in her Barcalounger—sat Bubbe Minkowitz, dressed in a powder blue terry-cloth robe.

"Herschel!" she said, warmly. "I was hoping I'd hear from you today." She looked around the room. "You must forgive me. I'm feeling a little fartootst." She clapped her wrinkled hands together. "Who's this?" she asked, pointing to the troll. "A friend to share the holidays? And look, he's wearing your old pajamas. Well, isn't that the cutest little thing?"

The troll crept up beside her.

Bubbe closed her eyes. "What's that wonderful aroma?" she asked.

"I baked a kugle," Herschel said. He hurried into the kitchen, returning with a warm bowl filled with the sweet pudding. "Here you go. Happy birthday."

"Oh!" Bubbe said in a sigh. "You found the recipe!" She ate with gusto. "Delicious!" she said, "and so light! You don't know how much I've wanted a bowl of this stuff, lately."

"Figgy pudding," said the troll, approving.

"Now aren't you adorable?" Bubbe said. She reached to pat its fur and let it lick her spoon.

"More figgy pudding," said the troll, beginning to growl.

Herschel blanched. "All gone," he said.

"Want it *now*!" said the troll. It stomped its foot.

"Dybbuks!" Bubbe whispered to Herschel. "You have to know how to handle them." She pulled a peppermint kiss from her pocket and held it before the troll. "Make nice and you can have this," she said.

The troll obeyed and opened its mouth. "Figgy pudding," it purred as she dropped the mint upon its tongue.

"Suck, don't chew," Bubbe said.

It rubbed its head against her arm. "We *wish* you."

"All I wish is for Herschel to be happy," Bubbe said. "I don't suppose a world-traveler like you would know of any nice Jewish girls?"

The troll jumped up and turned around thrice. It blinked hard, and a young woman dressed in a rumpled beige slacks suit appeared in the center of the room. "Where am I?" she asked.

"More figgy pudding, *now*!" said the troll.

"Good things come to those who wait," Bubbe answered, "but I guess that our work here is done. I've got Starlight Mints and a full can of Metamucil back at the home. Why don't you come along and keep me company?"

Something about the way she winked at Herschel made him wonder if she had conjured up the demon in the first place.

"Bubbe?" he asked, with a wry glance her way. "Since when do dybbuks look like trolls?"

"Cultural icons gotta change with the *times*," she answered with a shrug.

"I see it as assimilation, mixed with the immigrants' desire to become more American," said the young woman, perking up.

"She's a smart one, this girl. You take good care of her," Bubbe said with a warning look to Herschel, "or, next time, I'll conjure up *Barney*."

The troll took Bubbe's arm with a gallant gesture. "Glad tidings!" it said. "And a happy New Year!" In a flash, Bubbe and the troll disappeared.

The woman picked up the box of melba toast from the floor. Assuredly, she walked over to the Barcalounger. "I always hated that figgy pudding song," she said. She nibbled on her melba toast. "Cottage cheese would taste good with this," she said, looking at Herschel. "Say, don't I know you from the University? Math department, right? I'm in sociology."

He shook her hand, pleased to see her blush.

"You gotta excuse me," she said. "I'm fartootst. One minute I'm in Jersey watching *Jeopardy*, the next minute I'm *here*. Oy! And tonight is the

Tournament of Champions!"

Herschel grinned and brought her the remote. "I was just about to turn on the television," he said, crossing his fingers for luck. "I'm glad you're here." He felt more relaxed than he had in years. Surprisingly, he no longer cared *bubkes* about *Jeopardy*. Who knew? His inner troll had eaten. With the little guy temporarily out of the picture, maybe Herschel could finally get around to some serious romance! ●

—the author wishes to thank Martha Bayless for her contributions to this story.



BUBBE MINKOWITZ'S NOODLE KUGLE RECIPE

Ingredients: 1/2 pound egg noodles, 2 eggs separated, 1/2 cup brown sugar, 1/4 teaspoon cinnamon, 1/8 teaspoon salt, 3 tablespoons butter, 1/2 cup raisins, 1/4 cup chopped almonds, juice of 1/4 fresh lemon.

1. Preheat oven to 400 degrees.
2. Cook noodles according to package directions until tender and drain.
3. Beat egg yolks with sugar, cinnamon, nutmeg, and salt. Add drained noodles, butter, raisins, and almonds and mix well.
4. Beat egg whites until stiff and gently fold into noodle mixture. Pour into casserole dish, dot with butter and bake 45 minutes. Serves 4 adults, or one hungry inner troll.

THE NEW FAUST RE-READS THE FINE PRINT

All the midnights the Damned Magician
has turned into love or gold
on Hell's promise all of them would work
but one
are ash in his mouth,

and he turns no longer,
widdershins or clockwise,
in the circle of his own blood,
with the Voices of Power
ruthless in his ears,
taming his destiny

but sits brooding
over what went wrong

if it would have mattered if the blood
had been fresher drawn,
or the moon a fraction less past its zenith,
or if he said "Dee-abolus" instead of "Di-abolus,"
or if he hadn't moved the cup too soon,
or started on his right foot instead of his left,

anything

anything to blame
for the candle of life
he could not keep from going out

except his own blind arrogance,
his stupid youthful certainty
he could live with the bargain
"all spells
but one."

—William John Watkins



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The author's latest novel, *River of Dust*, is just out from William Morrow. It is based on his story, "Syrtis," which was originally published in the April 1994 issue of *Asimov's*. In his latest tale, he shows why some memories are nothing more than . . .

FRAGMENTS OF A PAINTED EGGSHELL

Alexander Jablakov

Illustration by Steve Cavallo



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"I'm not sure what you mean," Paula said, leafing through the immense stack of letters that had somehow come to be covering her kitchen counter. "Which old postcard are you talking about?" She tapped and aligned the envelopes, making them seem orderly.

"Well, any of them . . . but there is one specific one I'm thinking of." Mark's voice sounded hollow. He *did* insist on using that ancient heavy-handset phone, bought at some long-ago yard sale. He'd gotten it after the divorce, good riddance, and Paula had replastered the spot on the kitchen wall where it had hung. She wore a headset, and could move around as she cooked dinner. Mark had never been able to recognize the simplest solutions to things.

She started to open the letters with the cleaver, but quit when she saw how much red bell pepper she was getting all over everything. Besides, she should really finish chopping the pepper before she got to anything else.

"A postcard from France." She wandered from the kitchen into her office to look for a letter opener.

"Yes, that's right." Only something really important would make him call outside their usual schedule for sharing out Rue's time. So what was it about the postcards Mark had sent her while they were still dating that made her ex-husband desperate enough to talk to her?

"I just threw all that old stuff in boxes," she said, distracted by the Billable Accounts file displayed on her computer screen. She plopped down in her work chair, throwing the stack of letters into the overflowing "To Do" box on the floor, and started looking through the active accounts. "I wasn't in much of a mood to be too orderly. I don't even know if I still have any of it."

"You have it. Could you please take a look?"

"Sure, sure. . . ." There were some extra hours to be billed on the Hammersly house—Paula Pursang Construction had completely redesigned their moldings three times now. Easy money, but a pain in the ass. . . .

"Paula, are you paying attention to what I'm saying?" Mark's voice wasn't angry, just tired.

"Of course I am. It's somewhere in the basement. I'll just have to put a bucket over my head to protect myself against the Tergiversator, and go down there."

He laughed. He didn't want to, but he did. "Just take a position when you go down there, and hold it."

The Tergiversator was a creature who hid under the basement stairs and lived on equivocation. Paula couldn't remember how it had first been born—it might have been from a crossword puzzle clue—but it had a firm place in Pursang family mythology.

"That never works. Eventually you get an itch and have to scratch something, and . . ."

"Just find it, Paula. Please."

She knew exactly where that damn postcard was. It was in a cardboard box under a stack of heating ducting and vent grates, in a corner of the basement behind the furnace. If the basement flooded, as it used to every spring, the box would be soaked, leaving its contents to rot and get covered with mildew. But she had installed a sump pump and a dehumidifier last fall and the damn improvements worked too well. The basement was now dry enough to create mummies.

And she did remember that postcard in particular. It had been an antique one he bought from some street kiosk, showing the Palace of the Popes in Avignon in the 1920s. He wrote a note indicating that he had fallen through some sort of time warp, but was hoping the magical time-delay stamp he bought from the gypsy would ensure that the card was delivered to her eighty years later . . . and that he still thought about her with every new thing he saw.

It was all very sweet, but she had spent that summer sleeping with someone else, a fellow carpenter on a job, so she didn't take any of it too seriously. Still, she had put the card up on her refrigerator, where it had stayed many months amid the torn-out cartoons and orange-crate-label refrigerator magnets until Mark came back from Europe and she found herself engaged to be married to him.

"So why do you want it?" she asked. "Just tell me."

"It's Miriam."

"Oh. Miriam." Mark's new wife was named Miriam-Selina. Irritated by the compound name, Paula privately called her Miracle of Science. She had breasts like a female impersonator's. They couldn't be real.

"Now, Paula. If you're going to be like that, I don't have to tell you anything." Mark wouldn't have been human if his ex-wife's jealousy over his new wife hadn't, secretly, pleased him.

"All right, all right. So, Miriam."

"Miriam . . . well, we haven't been together very long. She wants our relationship to be of longer standing."

"Wait a while," Paula said. "It will be."

"No, no. She wants it to be longer *now*."

She froze for a moment, shocked at the depths of his betrayal. "And you want to steal my past, weld it on to hers? Make it seem like you and she have had a real life together? Buy a memory transfer so that you remember sending that postcard to *her*, and she remembers getting it. It'll cost you, you know. That sort of thing's not cheap." The emotion was too sudden, too strong, for her to even identify it as anger or grief. "So you just call me up, ask me casual-like to give up my past—"

"Paula—"

"Sure we screwed it up, lost it. It still means something. Do you think it doesn't?"

"I'm not doing this to hurt you, Paula."

"Then *why*?" Anger was easier.

His voice, when he finally spoke, was so quiet she could barely hear it. "Why don't you ask Rue?" And then he hung up, dropping the heavy receiver from the primitive phone hook once before finally managing to cut the connection.

Paula pulled her headset off and threw it across the room. Then, with exaggerated care, she hit a couple of keys and printed out an invoice on the Hammersly job. At least she'd gotten *something* done.

She sensed rather than heard the back door closing. Rue always came home silently, trying to seep in, as if her mother, dim as some senescent household pet, would conclude that she had really been there all along.

Paula had learned not to say hello to her when she first came in. It took Rue a while to adjust after coming into her mother's carefully built house, even though she had grown up in it. A little prowling around, a few minutes' ceremonial examination of the contents of the refrigerator—anything she took out she immediately put back in—and she would be calm enough to deal with.

"Hi, Mom," Rue said when Paula came out of her office. She sat hunched at the ceramic-tile counter, still wearing her ankle-length black coat, its shoulders wet with spring rain. Her hair, for a wonder, was combed and fresh, falling past her shoulders in soft dark curls. Until a few days before, it had been deliberately ratty and feral-smelling, like that of some distraught mad poetess. It drove Paula crazy. For years she had regarded that hair as a sort of joint possession. Rue had finally dissuaded her.

"Hello." Paula started getting the raw materials for dinner out of the refrigerator. The coat, worn tightly buttoned in the bright warm light of the kitchen she had worked so hard on, disturbed her. It was of textured leather, and sucked in close above Rue's hips, then flared out, ending up pleated at the tips of her boots. How much must such a thing have cost? It was dizzying. Rue was only fourteen.

"You know, Arnie, our sosh prof, is *such* a whack job." Rue rapped her gloved knuckles on the counter. Somehow, as Paula cracked eggs, they actually managed to have a discussion of sorts about Arnold Renborn, Rue's Sociological Sciences teacher. It helped that Paula honestly agreed with her daughter's assessment that the man was a fool.

Then, a long silence. "Mom, there's something I have to talk about with you."

Paula held tightly onto the egg bowl and set it clumsily on the counter. Without looking at Rue, she took all the eggshell halves and nested them before throwing them down the disposal.

"What is it, honey?"

"I—" Rue swallowed. This was bad. Usually she just dropped her news

on the table, take it or leave it, and was gone before Paula could react.

"I got a notification from Miriam-Selina Kaman's lawyer yesterday. I checked it with my legal program—seems okay. I won't actually sign up to anything without consulting our lawyer directly, of course." Rue's voice was desperately practical. "Miriam-Selina Kaman, her husband Mark Pursang, her cousin Ella Trumbull, and Trumbull's husband Winston Ortega are forming a family co-op, name as yet undetermined. There are four other kids and I've been invited to join."

"Oh." Paula felt like the guy in the joke who's had his head cut off but doesn't know it until he tries to nod. She wasn't going to nod. That was a nice bit of legalistic precision, sticking her father into the list simply as Mark Pursang, Miriam-Selina Kaman's husband. Fourteen. Rue was fourteen. Had Paula forgotten that? Had she forgotten that the joint-custody agreement let Rue make a decision when she reached that age?

"Oh, Mom, I know it's stupid and doesn't make any sense but . . . I don't know what it is. I look back and feel like I didn't have a childhood. Isn't that silly? You did the best for me and all but somehow it all sifted away. . . ." Looking at her mother with those clear blue eyes she'd gotten from Mark, Rue started to cry. "Oh no, oh no, never mind, I'll . . . oh, damn." She ran from the kitchen, still wearing her long coat buttoned as if she had never actually come into the house.

Paula continued to make dinner, even though it was clear Rue would not be eating it. She only half-watched the kitchen computer demonstrate the proper wrist technique for mixing her hollandaise and give her suggestions on resisting curdling. It noted that her burner was a little too hot, and reduced it for her. It also told her the pH was high. She thought about arguing with it, then added another squirt of lemon juice.

Rue had had a childhood. She just hadn't spent much of it with her mother. Paula remembered Rue lying on a couch. She was about five. The storms of the breakup were raging all around her, but she didn't see them. She stared off into space, seeing the entertainment channel pushed directly into her optic nerve. They'd selected quality programming for her, the last thing they managed to agree on. By age ten she had seen more than any adult in any previous era could possibly have experienced. With direct-experience feedback she'd probed beneath the seas and gone to the planets. Rue had run with dinosaurs and climbed the staircase of the DNA double helix.

This whole situation had already occurred in embryo. As she ladled the finished sauce over a piece of broiled mahi mahi, Paula felt like she was experiencing it again, only this time finally understanding it.

She had taken Rue on a picnic. It was a rare event, Paula had been working hard keeping her company from going under, but she had managed to get the hired wallboarders and tapers all set up, so that she was free for the afternoon. She and Rue drove out to a small town out in the

woods and set their tablecloth up on the grass of a mown field, near a puddle left from recent rains. Waterstriders skittered nervously across the surface.

Paula caught a trembling of light on an unmown stalk of grass.

"Look, Rue! It's a Tiger Swallowtail." The incredibly large black-striped yellow butterfly calmly moved its wings as if displaying itself. "Rue . . ."

But Rue was off playing with her imaginary playmate. Not a playmate she'd thought up herself, Paula thought uncomfortably, but one generated by the communication system into which she was linked. Paula had let her choose the parameters herself for her tenth birthday. The system expert assistant had helped Rue through the selection menus, guiding her according to the programming tastes revealed over the previous five years, all of which it had on record. Demoizle, a clever, fuzzy blue bunny, was the perfect playmate for Rue. Unctuously polite to Paula, Demoizle drove her crazy.

"Rue . . . Demoizle. This butterfly is really quite something. You should both see it." Didn't her program selection have a lot of nature shows? Paula remembered selecting that. But that was mostly orcas eating sea lions and weird worms that lived in deep-sea volcanoes. Nothing so dull as a real butterfly doing nothing more interesting than resting. A slight breeze tossed the grass, but the Tiger Swallowtail clung in its place, as if taunting her.

"Hey, Rue!" Demoizle called, hopping across the tall grass. "I think it's time for a . . . Sookie!" It rolled an image of the round candy across its back like a show-off basketball player. The candy glowed ruby red. Despite the fact that it was just sugar and a weird red-berry flavor nature had not had the wit to create, Paula found herself wanting to eat one.

"Hey, Mom, can Demoizle and I have a Sookie?"

"I was just setting out our lunch. How about—"

But Rue had already dug into the picnic basket, grabbed a handful, and was off, giggling. Perfect imaginary playmate or not, a lot of advertising came along with Demoizle's programming. Acquiescing to that was the only way Paula could afford the high-end connection. The system-end that was Demoizle monitored Rue, and could even call an emergency response team if necessary. It was the perfect companion. A lot of working parents depended on them. Plus, since the advertising was so powerful and relentless, Paula never had to worry about what Rue would want. She was able to supply all her daughter's needs by subscribing to the quick-purchase program the advertisers provided free.

Perhaps Demoizle was the form that the house computer took when it gave Rue legal advice. It had been a long time since Paula had checked the interface parameters. She sat down to eat. The fish was perfect, the sauce thick and rich. She wanted to throw her plate against the wall.

"Mom?" Rue's voice drifted tentatively into the kitchen. "Could you come in here?"

Rue lay already in bed, under her covers. Her leather coat, her gloves, her boots, all her armor was now neatly arranged on a chair, ready to be put on the next morning.

With her freshly brushed shining hair, which Paula now recognized as an ineffective gesture of peace, Rue looked impossibly young. Looked her age, in other words, a girl not yet a woman with her covers pulled demurely up to her neck. She had even pulled stuffed animals out of whatever cabinets they had been stored in, presents from some now-forgotten relatives of Mark's. Rue had never played with them, at least not since Demoizle's appearance. They didn't talk or move. They were just dumb lumps of stuffing and fake fur. The teddy bear's limbs stuck out stiffly, and he was as clean and fresh as if he'd just that moment been pulled from his box, and thus utterly unloved. Rue had put one arm around him, but she didn't really care about him. He had no name, for no imagination had ever been exerted to give him life.

"Could you tell me a story, Mom? It's been a long time. . . . I'm kind of sleepy, it would be nice."

That was absurd. Fourteen was much too old for bedtime stories, and Paula was in no way used to telling them. Rue had always had her own entertainment to put her to sleep. The sound of it had always whispered under the door. Paula sat down on the edge of the bed. Rue was just giving her something to do, something that made her feel like a mother.

"A long time ago, there was a young woman named Sara. She lived in . . . Persia, and she wanted to get married. But every time she found a husband, an evil demon named Asmodeus killed her bridegroom on their wedding night."

It was odd, how that had floated up. Paula's grandmother had told her the story of Tobit when Paula had been just a little girl. She remembered the lingering almond-and-chocolate smell of the cocoa and the crispness of the overstarched sheets. It was an odd Bible story, but Paula could remember it, and that was the important thing. She described how Tobias, whom she called Toby, came across the country with the archangel Raphael, married Sara, and drove off Asmodeus.

"Asmodeus was captured and imprisoned by Raphael in a deep dark prison. Raphael, you see, was Toby's guardian angel."

"What color were his feathers?" Rue, who didn't seem particularly interested in the story, managed to force the question out.

"Guardian angels don't have wings with feathers," Paula said, suddenly inspired. "They have brightly colored wings like butterflies." And Raphael, she hoped and prayed, had the yellow-and-black wings of a Tiger Swallowtail.

"That's good," Rue said. "I'll go to sleep now."

"Good night, dear."

Paula put the dishes in the washer, then noticed a brightly colored brochure lying on the counter. Superimposed on a photo of a handsome collection of Colonial Revival houses amid huge dark maples, a good-parts version of a New England town, was the title OUR NEW FAMILY. Oh, God, she thought. A brochure to advertise a family? Nice houses, though. She wouldn't mind living there herself.

Inside a bunch of happy children played some obsolete game, ring-around-the-rosie, or something. Their heads were thrown back in laughter and their long hair streamed like comets. One she recognized as Miriam-Selina's daughter Kali, another as a younger Rue, brought together here with the other children of the proposed family through the miracle of computer image creation. Their parents, Mark among them, watched adoringly. It was an image impossible to create with a single camera shot: everyone was in perfect focus. And Mark's teeth had been straightened.

Paula tore the brochure into tiny pieces, stuffed it down the garbage disposal, and went to bed.

"Look, boss, you gotta understand," Virgie said. "Leo's a retired mad-man." She fluffed her hair, then set her hard hat back down on it.

Paula watched the level readout as the array of hydraulic jacks lowered the house down onto its newly poured concrete foundation. The house was small and ugly, sided in asphalt, and many of its windows were already cracked. She waited tensely for one of them to shatter, but the house just groaned once when it touched its new foundation. Her team checked the alignment of the sill, then pulled out the jacks and threw them on the truck. The damn things were rented, and not cheap.

"You mean he's retired from being mad?" Paula said, as she checked the foundation for cracks. She'd caught the pourer trying to stiff her on the percentage aggregate. You had to watch everything.

"Hardly. He seems to be more freelancing, if you know what I mean."

"I'm not sure . . ."

The scrofulous little house had been hauled out of a neighborhood of similarly abused old structures, its old foundation hole to be turned into a swimming pool for the house in front. But, Paula wondered as she looked around at the warehouses, weeds, and broken concrete of this abandoned industrial area, why would the owner want to move it here? Unless he really was mad, in which case maybe taking the job hadn't been such a good idea.

Virgie divined her worry. "It's okay, it's just something he's set on doing. He wants a good restoration, he's got the bucks, we're all right."

Virgie was a kick-ass carpenter, but she didn't know squat about business. Still, she'd gotten a good contract with this Leo. Hidden somewhere

under the asphalt shingles, the rotted window frames, the hideous wallpaper, was a Greek Revival house from 1838, and Leo was willing to pay to have it restored to its original glory.

"How'd you meet this guy, anyway?" Paula asked. Just behind the house was a rusted chain-link fence. On the other side was a hill of garbage, mostly broken bottles. With luck, by midsummer weeds would have concealed the worst of it.

Virgie tugged at her belt, then shrugged. "I came to Leo to save my marriage."

"It didn't work." Paula didn't want to be harsh, but Virgie did tend to go on about it.

"Well, no . . . but that wasn't Leo's fault." Virgie squatted against the foundation wall, letting her hanging tools rest on the ground.

"Karl was always really busy. His job was important, he worked for that insurance company, they had a lot of cases all over, big ones. He was always away, and it was rough on the kids. Oh, he did his best. He'd tape-record bedtime stories for them while he was driving from the airport to his hotel, though sometimes he'd yell at other drivers and forget to edit it out. He would have them fax him their homework, and he'd talk it over with them. He had to be away on Marty's birthday, and I played a recording of him singing 'Happy Birthday' . . . he really does have a good voice, you know. He sang in college. Marty just cried. You'd think kids nowadays would be the ones who realized how irrelevant whether he was actually physically *there* or not was. After all, they grew up with all this stuff. They're all interconnected."

It was when Virgie defended her ex-husband that things got bad. Paula wondered if Mark ever defended her actions to others. It was a weird thing wronged lovers did, and it always made friends furious.

"So I brought them to Leo. Leo's a memory man, I think you knew that. Implantation, design. Used to be a bigwig at some company, don't know how that fell out. This was pretty easy for him, he probably could have done it in his sleep. After all, all the stuff was there. He just had to turn it real. When he was done, Marty and Lisa remembered their dad being there for everything. Helping with the homework. Singing at the birthday party. He just grafted memories from when he was there over onto places when he wasn't. I didn't tell anyone about it. I was kind of ashamed, you know, going to a service to get the kids to love their father. Plus, it cost a bundle, most of what I saved."

This threw a new light on what had happened. Virgie's husband had soon requested a divorce, and kept the children. Their love for him was relatively uncomplicated, and thus easier for them to deal with, than their relationship with their not-entirely consistent mother.

Virgie looked up at her. "And you know how he let me know he wanted a divorce? By fax."

The restructuring of Leo's house proved to be a great job for Paula's team. They stripped the asphalt shingles off, and the rotting, ancient clapboards underneath. The huge, old sheathing boards were still in good shape, so they sealed them with house wrap and nailed up fresh clapboards. They sucked almost everything out of the inside of the house, finding corncob insulation between some of the studs.

Leo was a big, hairy bear of a man, sexily sloppy, gloomy. As they tore apart and rebuilt his house, he crouched in an upstairs room, beneath the flapping blue plastic tarp that had replaced an out-of-period dormer and did . . . well, whatever it was he did.

He only came down when the crew finished. On the third day, Paula was there when he did, making sure the tools were all arranged in the corner. Leo let them store on the site, saving her a good hour hauling the stuff off the truck and into her basement when she was through, so the least she could do was see that everything was out of his way.

"Why here?" she asked. "This area's a nightmare." They had already cleaned spray-painted graffiti off the foundations.

"This is where the house originally stood. I checked out the records. Here in Crow's Fields."

"This isn't Crow's Fields anymore."

"Gotta start somewhere." Leo heated up a can of soup, poured a glass of whiskey, ripped chunks of bread off and stuffed them into his mouth, all as if he was completely alone.

"Start what?"

"Getting this place to remember to remember what it once was." He sat down and slurped soup.

Once woodlands, swamp, farmer's field—now abandoned warehouses, shabby rubble-strewn lots, useless parking lots. Who the hell cared?

"You mean what it *really* was?"

He shifted in the beat-up old dining room chair he used at his kitchen table. It creaked perilously. Dried remnants of milk and cereal were still on the tablecloth in front of him, generations of them.

"You know, people give me a lot of shit about what I do, but when they need me, they come here." He scratched vigorously in his beard with blunt fingers. "I used to make a lot of money, you know. A *lot* of money. I was Engram's chief designer. But then, I dunno, I got afflicted with art." He paused over the initial vowel. "Aaht. Bad thing, for a professional. Interferes with your work something terrible. Regular people don't need memories that blaze like stained-glass windows. It just disturbs them."

Paula thought about Rue, her Rue, perambulating around those solemn houses in the woods, part of her new family. It was a fashion, of course, these colonies, far from malls and overlit parking structures. Did fourteen-year-olds think that kind of thing was cool now? Paula wondered how much it had cost someone to get them to think that, and what

money stood to be made from it.

"So how do you choose memories that won't drive people crazy? How do you fit them in with everything else?"

Leo snorted. "You know, everyone can't just remember growing up in the Swiss Family Robinson. Rubs up against things too hard/'Hey, when I was a kid, me and my whole family, we lived in a tree.' Nope, no way. World's not ready for shit like that. Not yet, anyway. Once it gets accepted that it's all . . . well, not fictional, no one wants to admit that, but *non-consensus*, then you can go with whatever past you want. Whatever you're comfortable with. After all, it formed your personality, so it has as much reality as it needs, right?"

Maybe it really was that simple. Maybe it would all be fine, and Rue would still remember that Paula was her mother.

The hill seemed to go on forever. Paula slid her butt back on her seat and concentrated on keeping her back straight as she pedaled. Her lungs and her quads burned, but she kept the pace up, feeling her heart pounding in her chest. Keep the cadence high, push your stomach out when you breathe, she knew the damn rules . . . she cranked past an old farmhouse with a long view out across blue-and-green hills. A blossoming apple orchard stretched out behind it. She rubbed sweat off her forehead with the back of her glove, then tilted her helmet back forward. She'd pulled the bicycle out of the basement that morning, first time this spring. She'd been busy. It still had late-fall muck all over it, and she'd spent a good two hours cleaning, lubricating, adjusting. And now she was still trying to pretend to herself that she was just out on a long, get-the-kinks-out ride.

By the time Paula got to the crest of the hill, she felt like throwing up. She pulled the top off her water bottle, drained it, then rested forward on her handlebars. The long view was gone here, on the top of the hill, blocked out by the huge maple trees.

It had been easy to find the land the family co-op was building on. It had been purchased recently, and they'd had to file a whole slew of building permits. She just wanted to take a look at it, that was all, and think about what she was going to do. Rue had her rights, but a mother had her rights too.

She pushed off and whizzed down the hill. The road was a little rough, but it was her reward for having climbed up. The delicate spring leaves blurred at the edges of her vision. She felt the cool air on every square inch of her skin, through the tight Lycra of her bib shorts and the synthetic of her jersey.

She hit the brakes. Cobham Road. That was it. If she'd managed to drift past it, she might have been able to keep herself from turning around and climbing back up to get to it. She coasted down the road. A

dump truck, a Bobcat, a pile of four-by-fours. She was there. She leaned her bike against a tree and walked slowly up the dirt driveway, its route marked by stakes with fluorescent tape on the ends. They'd curved it neatly past two ancient beech trees. Ahead, the compound's five buildings looked even more like a small New England town in person than they did in the advertising brochure.

Rue's right to transfer here was all part of an affection-rights litigation so complicated Paula suspected that even her lawyer didn't completely understand it, though he spoke with hearty confidence about the minimally bad consequences for her. Affection was a valuable resource in divorce cases, on a par with property, and now that affection, through appropriate memory insertion, was transferable, it was subject to litigation like everything else.

On closer examination she could see that the largest of the structures was actually an old building, probably a barn, restored and rebuilt, rather than a fresh structure. No one had cut beams that size for a century and a half. She also recognized the blue panel truck labeled *G. Maier & Miscellaneous Descendants, General Contractors*. She'd worked with Betsy Maier on a job once. The Maiers had been working construction west of Boston for seventy-five years.

The whine of a portable radial arm saw came from inside the building. She poked her head around the edge of the dark door and waited for a pause in the work, so that the man cutting boards to length, who had every reason to believe he was alone, wouldn't be startled into sawing his hand off. He stopped, let out a breath, pulled his goggles up.

"Excuse me," she said.

He turned around. Sawdust and dirt around where his goggles had been gave him a strange, inverse-raccoon look. His eyes gave her the male up-and-down-and-back-up, as automatic as a blink reflex, and almost as meaningless. She wondered why they did it. It wasn't clear that they actually saw anything.

"Is Betsy working this job?"

"She is, but she isn't here today." Something in his attitude indicated that he had been glad no one was around, so that he could work without being bothered. He was, she saw, cutting crisp dentil moldings for a ceiling. He examined her again. Well, she was wearing Lycra shorts and a biking jersey. She had long legs and kept herself in shape, though those calves could use some work, she needed to bike more. It wasn't his fault if he looked. "Hey, you're . . . ah, Pursang, right? Yeah, I had a friend who worked a job with you. Harry Sims."

"I remember Harry." She leaned against the door jamb, folded her arms. "Good electrician." Harry drank too much, but if he and this guy were friends. . . .

"Before lunch, anyway. So you here to bid, or what?" He had the com-

plete outdoors version of the reddish-blond look: curly hair, blue eyes, good arms.

"Bid?"

"Yeah, on that stuff upstairs. The leftover job. He left us high and dry. Very unprofessional." He pulled off his gloves, extended his hand. She shook it. It was warm and firm, with just enough rough spots to let her know he really was who he appeared to be. "Nate Krivitsky. Why don't you go upstairs, take a look. I shouldn't say it, but Betsy's pretty desperate. She'll take any reasonable offer." He smiled. Maybe he would too.

Upstairs was a mess, piled boards, tools in no good order, stuff marked but not cut, stuff cut but not joined. There was clearly an elaborate scheme for a wall of cabinets and closets, a modern updating of Shaker work, but someone had abandoned it in mid-job. A couple of days ago or more: there was a thin coating of dust on everything.

Paula balanced herself on the frame of what was supposed to be a window seat that opened up into a chest and looked out of the window at the tree tops. When Rue was small, Paula had built her cave-like hiding places throughout the house, a couple directly into the walls and one above a landing on the stairs, so that Rue could peer out and see what was going on while remaining concealed. She had brought her friends over to play, and had worked out an elaborate series of knocks on the wall to let her mother know what sandwich she wanted for lunch. Fortunately, it was invariably peanut-butter-and-jelly, so Paula had never had to remember the code, though she pretended she did.

That hiding had been an innocent childhood game, though the glowing form of Demoizle had sometimes squeezed its way through the darkness, whispering, tempting Rue away from her own necessary self. What a terrifying thing it was, Paula now thought, feeling the newly planed wood with her fingertips. What a terrifying thing that you couldn't leave your child to play underneath the kitchen counter in your own house and not expect the world outside to slide itself insinuatingly alongside her while you were making dinner.

Rue had decided to come here, in a desperate attempt to escape her own life. And here, in front of Paula, was the wood of which that life would be built. It didn't even occur to her to say no. She was a builder. She knew how to drive a nail straight into her own heart.

She hadn't gotten close enough to him to tell, but she hoped that Nate's body odor was sour. If he smelled good, she was in trouble. That, she didn't need.

"But I could fill in the gaps in our life together," Paula said, her voice unsteady. "If what you say is true. If it's as if that other stuff isn't there at all." He'd asked her to sit down with him after her team got through

for the day, have a couple of drinks with him. She shouldn't have done it. Now she felt weepy.

Leo glowered at her from the other side of the table, the candlelight catching the underside of his face and making him look more than ever like a bear. He grabbed the bottle and poured more rum into his glass.

"I didn't say it was like it wasn't there at all. It's just that those memories are constrained. The system keeps a complete record. It knows what was on and what Rue's autonomic response to it was—pupil dilation, peripheral vasoconstriction, adrenal secretion. The system knows what that damn blue bunny of hers convinced her to do, and every word she said to it. Every whispered secret. Fifty percent of her waking life between the ages of five and fourteen is on record. We know what your daughter's memories of her childhood are *because we put them there*. And those memories are to real ones what green-painted concrete is to a garden. Nice and constrained, as close to a closed-form solution as you can get in this life. Slots for memory modules. We've been preparing for minds that accept synthetic memories for three generations now, and we didn't even know it."

"That's what I mean," she said. "Can I fill those places in with something else? Some memories of, I don't know, her and me? Doing something? Hanging around together?"

"Baking cookies, feeding the cows, watching Clem win in his age division at the county fair rodeo? Sure, we can do that. Give you the matching memories, make it just like it was real. Just like she was really your daughter."

Damn, she *was* weepy. She wiped her eyes with her knuckles. "But it wouldn't be *real*, would it? It wouldn't be natural."

He laughed, a sound like a slap. "Natural? What the hell is that, girly? If you had a disease, would you refuse a shot of antibiotic because antibiotics aren't 'natural'? Dying, living a cripple. Those are *natural*."

"But she'd be someone else then. Not Rue."

"Contrary to what you might have heard," he said, "it's not actually that easy to change a personality by sticking in false past memories. The old personality wants to continue to *exist* somehow, like a vampire that won't be killed. The new memories get rearranged to justify the old personality. Sometimes people contract for memories that make them make sense to themselves. Gives them an excuse for being what they are. Obnoxious, unpleasant, distant from those who love you? Create memories of mistreatment by your parents. It all makes perfect sense *then*."

His despair hung around him like a swarm of gnats, making him squint and squish up his face. He had real memories back there somewhere. He seemed very attached to them: an odd, regressive sentiment.

"We all do that," she said. "Freelance and untrained. We have to. . ."

"Bah," he said. "That's childish. All of it is. You're just avoiding the

main issue. Tell me. Do you love your daughter?"

He barked the question, and thrust his face into hers like an interrogator in a concrete-walled basement cell trying to extort a confession. His eyes were flat planes of meanness, and for an instant she couldn't think of an answer, as if the reply was something complicated, easily screwed up.

"Yes!" She choked in a breath. "Yes, I love Rue. I love my daughter!"

"Why?" His voice was suddenly gentle. The interrogator was sure he had broken his prisoner.

"Why? Because . . . I *do*." She looked away from his harsh gaze. A streetlight had been captured in the countless independent drops on the window. Each had its own vision of the light, and each was exactly the same.

He shook his head. "You love your daughter because you were *programmed* to. It's . . . *natural*." He lingered contemptuously over the syllables. "A complex preset behavior evoked by a releaser. Evolution, survival. Well, you know the drill."

"No," she whispered.

"The solution is obvious." He was remorseless. "Just eliminate her from *your* memories. That's the best way. After all, she's not much there in the first place, is she? What were you doing all that time while she was having needs and desires squished through her eye socket with a caulking gun?"

Working, screwing whoever she found attractive, keeping the house working, getting food on the table. . . .

"God damn you!" She grabbed the edge of the table, ready to turn it over on him, crush him underneath it like a detestable bug. It felt good. She hadn't broken anything in a long time.

He bellowed laughter, but skittered back out of his chair. The rum bottle shook, fell over, spilled expensive alcohol onto the floor. He swooped down to pick it up.

"Well," he said. "Well." He turned the chair and sat in it backward, resting his elbows on the back.

Her fingers were still tight on the edge of the table. She willed them to relax. He was cheery, but she wasn't ready to make peace. She shouldn't get emotionally involved with clients, on any level. It just made the job that much harder.

"You hate them all, don't you?" he said. "All the members of that damn compound-named family. You want to kill them."

"I don't want to kill them, Leo." She was shivering from the aftereffects of her surge of rage. She sat back down at the table. Rich-smelling rum dripped slowly off onto the floor. She felt its wetness, then licked it slowly off her fingers. Its bite seemed sharper tasted that way. She liked that too.

"Sure you do. All those grinning bastards." Leo leaned forward conspiratorially. He smelled of rum. "You want, I can get you the genuine uncensored memories of a *guaranteed* serial killer. Topnotch. Specialized in families. Greased about twelve family units afore they got him. Liked to prowl around National Park campgrounds, you know, Grand Canyon, places like that. I'm sure you've seen pictures. He'd listen for those kids, that mom and dad, track down the last lingering scent of grilled hamburgers, find the tent glowing from within with the Coleman—"

"Stop it, Leo."

"It's the real stuff, babe. The abuse, the being locked in the closet, the shackles made out of Radio Shack speaker wire, the public housing with the broken glass in the windows." He grinned. "All the central memories of America! I can overlay them for an afternoon, you want to go out guns blazing. There's a time limit, even on the bootlegs. Killers get to like themselves that way. They like themselves and they don't want to change. They try to escape, head over to murder every last person in a deep-fried sushi hut or someplace, and just as they're pulling the machine pistol out of the gym bag, the memories go away, and they find themselves with nothing in their heads but their own boring past, the pointless frustrations and actions that never went anywhere. Very disappointing. They lose the ability to act, even irrationally."

He was close now, and she could feel the damp heat rising off him. Paula stood. She shouldn't have gotten so drunk. Not here, not with this madman. "Good night, Leo," she said.

He just smiled up at her. "You want to forget about tonight, you can. Labile short term's real easy to erase. I got some storage blockers. . . ."

"Thanks," she said. "Maybe some other time."

It was an old bridge, with a pair of giant black-iron lanterns sticking up in the middle of it, looking, with their sharp spikes, like medieval crowns. The abandoned crowns of deposed kings—the glass within them had shattered and disappeared, and the bridge was now lit by a line of skinny metal poles topped with more-secure pinspot halogens. The black stream below surged through low arches.

"It's a nature reserve," Rue said. "I like to come here." She teetered precariously on the railing and peered down into the murky water. Paula stared at her daughter's embroidered ostrich-hide cowboy boots and bit down on the immediate command to *get down*.

"Nature?" The bridge had once carried a country road over a river, but that had been a long time ago. Then the city had engulfed the spot, a shopping mall had been built, housing developments, some of them now the worse for wear. Paula and Rue could barely hear each other, shouting above the thunder of the endless lines of cars as they irritably crossed the bridge and clumped up at the mall parking lot entrance. Aside from a

line of trees along the water's edge, there was little visible that was actually alive.

"Yeah." Rue chuckled, and sat down. Paula flinched as a grunting truck pushed too close against the narrow sidewalk, but Rue didn't seem to notice. She sat like a child alone, as if the center of this bridge was a secret hiding place and no one could see her. She liked to come here, she said. "People sometimes don't get it. They think nature is only in . . . the Rockies, or something. Out in the woods. Not true!"

When a child brought a parent to a secret place, it was usually because the place was no longer secret. It had lost its power, its magic, and, being just a place, was now safe to reveal. Why was Rue giving up her secret place? Paula thought she knew.

"Like . . . look!" Rue pointed with an elegantly gloved finger. Last night's rain had left the mall parking lot covered with innumerable puddles. The black asphalt looked like the surface of the land after the glaciers had receded. As Paula looked in astonishment, a red fox, followed by four kits, trotted nonchalantly across the parking lot, cutting off an irritable driver, who honked at it. The mother waved her white-tipped tail, completely unimpressed, and led her brood into a culvert at the river's edge.

"I thought . . ." Paula said the first thing that came into her mind. "I thought foxes were nocturnal."

"Well, yeah." Rue was suddenly irritated. "But if they still were, who would see them? It would be dangerous to come out here at night."

"True," Paula said, half to herself. "What's the point of a nature reserve if you can't see the nature?"

"Right! There's a couple of moose you can see here, they live in the shed where they keep the snow plows. And there's wolves sometimes."

Paula remembered now. The pressure on natural habitats had become extreme. Human beings wouldn't change, so animals had to. Memory implantation, modification—what sorts of people became experts in animal memories? However they had done it, they had succeeded, not in making the fox think she was alone in the woods, but in making her take for granted the presence of people, cars, and asphalt. Like butterflies, she thought. Butterflies never worried if anyone was around to see them. They just spread their wings.

Paula leaned against the railing, against her daughter's leg. Try as she might, she couldn't ignore the traffic thundering by.

"I can't keep you if you don't want to stay," Paula said. "Not now that you've reached the age . . . but do you have to kill me?" She suddenly felt like shouldering her daughter off the bridge into the swirling black water.

"Mom! I'm . . . not." Rue reached down and patted her mother's shoulder with her soft leather glove.

"Then just go. Go to the Kaman-Trumbull-Ortega co-op, live there. Go! But don't—"

Leaning on Paula's shoulder, Rue lowered herself to sit on the granite-topped railing. A fresh breeze had sprung up, ruffling the dark water and editing out the V of ripples flowing out from the earnestly laboring head of a beaver. Black and gray clouds streamed by overhead, torn from their squeeze past the horizon.

"A couple of days ago I was going through some stuff," Rue said. "I found a painted Easter egg. Something had fallen on it, it was broken. Everything was dried up inside. Here."

Paula looked at the bright fragment of eggshell on her daughter's palm, yellow starbursts on a swirling green and blue background. Rue's fingers curled over and it disappeared.

"Do you remember when I made it?" Rue asked.

"Sure. It was wax-resist dyeing, the Ukrainian lady down the block showed us how. You keep covering successive layers of color with wax, then dyeing again, until the egg's completely covered. Then you scrape it all off, and see what you've made. You're not sure what it looks like until then. Fun. You were . . . ten." The color emerged gradually from under the soot-darkened candle wax, a bright egg hatching from a dark one.

Rue shook her head. "I don't remember it. At all. Demoizle must have been playing me some show, who knows what? When I found the broken shell in a drawer, I had to reconstruct the day, like I was an archeologist or something. I think," she sucked a breath through her nose, "it would have been nice to be there."

Spilled streaks of dye had enlivened the white stove and the candles had melted on to the tablecloth. Rue had been humming to herself, tossing her head in time to inaudible music. But she'd gotten so good at faking being *present*, because she knew her mother got mad otherwise.

"Rue, there was no one to help, it was so hard. . . ."

"Hard? I didn't grow up, Mom. I never *existed*. My treasure chest is empty." A light flick of her wrist and the colored fragment of eggshell went spinning off the bridge. "Isn't that what my memories are supposed to be like? A treasure chest? I emptied it myself, and filled it with junk. And you let me. I wasn't old enough to know better, and you *let me*!"

And she was running, as fast as she could on her stiff, high-heeled cowboy boots, her coat tight around her thighs. In a few steps, not even thinking about it, Paula had caught up with her, grabbed her waist, and swung her around. Rue struggled for a moment, then gave up. Her mother had always been much stronger and faster than her. Demoizle, even in his software-upgraded teenage companion incarnation, rarely carried fitness channels.

"Damn you!" Paula shouted. "Think about what you're doing."

Rue turned her head away. "Please let me go."

"Just think!"

"Please!" Rue wailed. "I don't want to be who I am. I'm not *anybody*. I turned Demoizle off, canceled the contract. He'll be gone when you get home."

Despite herself, Paula felt a pang of loss, one carefully calculated by the designers of the interface. That damn blue bunny was the creature that knew Rue best. Now, he too had vanished.

"Let go!"

For a long moment Paula's arms would not respond. Then, finally, Paula managed to drop them to her sides, and do as she was asked.

"On her sixth birthday the Pursang girl was . . . here, forty-six-and-a-half inches tall." Nate was reading from a computer-generated list.

Frank, one of the other workers, made a ragged pencil mark on the wall.

"And on her eighth birthday . . ."

They were building a family history into the house. Here, in one of the attic rooms, the wall was covered with the marks of children's heights, evidence that they had always lived here, ever since being brought back squalling from the hospital. Once all the marks were up, they would oxidize and age that portion of wall.

Paula had done as much cabinet work as she was willing to do that day, and had wandered in to see what the other guys were doing. Misty holograms filled the other end of the room, each of them of a corner of some house, with height marks. Each of the images was something a child remembered—Paula recognized the wall of her kitchen, where she had, irregularly, marked Rue's growth until somehow they had both forgotten about it around her tenth birthday. These strands of memory were being braided together.

"You have kids, Paula?" Nate was next to her, and, damn it, he did smell nice.

"Me? N-no. No. Never had the time."

"I don't have any either, but that's not why."

She wasn't going to ask why. She didn't want to talk to him. He was too nice. She didn't want nice, no matter how nice-looking.

"Fast work on that drawer."

"Thanks." She moved a little away from him, and he returned his attention to the marks, even though they were almost done.

No kidding, fast work. Her assignment had been to build in a drawer that had little faces and letters scratched through the varnish in a childish scrawl. That hadn't been too hard—the original of that drawer was in her pantry. Rue had done it at age six. Paula hadn't had the heart to punish her. She'd done it not long after her height had been marked with a pen-knife-sharpened pencil on the wall. . . .

"Look at this one." Frank held up a lead Napoleonic soldier with a missing leg. "Manny Ortega lost this under the floorboards of his attic at home when he was nine." He slid it under a loose board. "They plan to find it sometime this next winter. Manny will get put to work rebuilding this old attic, and a piece of his past will reappear." They had finished the attic only last week, but a lot of work, and some specialized fungi, had made it look decades old.

These workers were serious, dedicated to their work, and insanely well paid. The structures they created had to match the mental structures of the people who would be living in them. The constraints were fiendishly difficult and precise. All the different parts of these people would finally fit together in this house like a complex joint, one that held itself together without glue or screw.

The multiple panes of the dormer window refracted slightly varying views of the yard. A man walked slowly there, a man with an erect posture, but a sadness in the hang of his head.

"So, Paula, do you think—" Nate began, but she was already on her feet and out of the attic.

Her former husband was heading around the corner of the house. She sprinted down the creaking wood stairs, almost sliding off on the sawdust and wood scraps, and ran out the back of the house. Another huge beech spread its branches there. With a desperate leap that used up her last reserves of strength, she got her hands on the smooth bark and pulled herself up.

Mark came slowly around the corner of the house, looking up at it. He didn't look happy. She knew him. The house was a fake, and he knew it, and it bothered him. Miriam-Selina had badgered him into this plan, and he was regretting it even before it came to pass. But he would work at it. He always kept working at things. He only gave them up if they were utterly impossible.

"Pssst," she said. "Hey, Mister. Want to buy some leaves?" She pulled off a handful, let them sift down. "Beech. Very rare. Could get some maple, if you want, but it'll cost you."

He stood stock still for a long moment, not looking up at where she sat, as if he had expected her to be there all along, feared it, but was still not reconciled to it.

"Hello, Paula," he said. "I thought it was you the workers mentioned. The magical weekend worker."

"One of a kind, that's me."

"Paula, I'm sorry. But we're going to do it. All of it. We have to. You know what our daughter—"

She cut him off before he could tell her what Rue had become. "I know. Do you think you can recreate innocence? Here in this garden?"

"You know me better than that." He smiled wearily. "I don't think any-

thing of the sort. But I have to try, Paula. You know I have to try."

"Miracle of . . . Miriam-Selina, right? She wants it."

His face stiffened. That was the wrong approach. No matter what problems they might be having, an attack on Miriam-Selina would just make him clamp his shell shut. Paula was the wrong person to be asking any questions.

"I'm sorry, Mark. But I want to know. I want to understand . . . you're going to take her memories and reattach them, right?"

"As many as we can."

"Give me an example. I just want to know."

"Remember when she broke her leg . . . bicycling?"

"Yes," she said. His barely noticeable pause indicated doubt about the story he had been given by both Paula and Rue.

"Well, there's a spot down the hill here. A place with some loose rock. Mountain biking, going too fast, she slid right off the trail . . . we carried her back up to the house."

"We?"

"Miriam and I." He had the grace to look embarrassed. "Miriam found her."

"What team work! Actually, you know, Rue took off from school in the middle of the day in a friend's car. They all got drunk, egged on the driver, and he finally rammed the car into traffic barrier. He was killed. We didn't want to tell you. You say that happened on the hill down here? Tricky driving. Have fun fitting that memory in."

"Oh, Paula," he said.

She jumped off her branch, landing lightly in front of him. He seemed smaller than she remembered, and lighter. His clothes were loose on him. He looked levelly at her with his blue eyes, the eyes Rue had gotten. Paula had forgotten how much she liked looking at him.

"This is impossible," he said, so softly and quickly that she could barely hear him. "Impossible." He distractedly scratched the top of his head, a well-remembered and well-loved gesture.

"Well, really, Mark," she said. "You didn't expect this to be easy, did you?"

"No."

They found themselves walking together across the wide lawn. The leaves had exploded on the trees, and the substructure of branches, so visible a week or so ago, had almost completely disappeared. The white houses were stern and crisp against their sifting green backdrop. It seemed like a place Mark would want to live. But Miriam-Selina? Nothing rustic about that girl, that was for sure. No amount of hay-mowing, frog-catching memories would keep her from going crazy here.

Mark must know that. He wasn't stupid.

"Are you putting a Tergiversator in the basement?" she asked.

"No," he said. "That one's yours. I couldn't take it."

"It's not mine. It's ours."

It's ours. Was it stupid that the phrase almost made her cry? Damn it, she'd *cheated* on the son of a bitch. Her own inability to sign up to the demands of marriage had destroyed them. Ours. Nothing was ours anymore. Not even Rue.

"Yeah, well." They paused at the edge of the trees. Sap still dripped from the newly cut boughs. "Rue wants to try. She really does."

"I know," Paula managed. Just for an instant she'd had a feeling of reconciliation, as if, somehow, it would all go away and be what it was. Or what it should have been. But the moment was gone, and she remembered Mark's deep stubbornness. He was deceptively mild, accommodating, willing to make allowances . . . but when he reached his limit, he reached it, and didn't ever come back from it. For all she knew, he went to bed every night desiring Paula Pursang desperately, and tossed around with the night sweats. He would deal with it. He'd never come back.

"Then I won't be the one to stand in her way," Paula said, and turned and left him there by the still-bleeding edge of the forest, a look of disappointment in his eyes.

The guys were gone from upstairs. All of them, that is, besides Nate. He faked nonchalance, but she knew he was attracted to her. She could get involved with him, have a good few months, maybe start to get over all this, before it all fell apart again. Another screechy revolution of the piss-rusted hamster wheel that was her life.

"Nate," she said. "Do you remember your childhood?"

"Want my childhood?" He knelt, came up with a double handful of wood shavings. "Smell." She did, inhaling the delicate dry odor of paper-thin oak. "My dad. He was a woodworker too, though just as a hobby, in his basement after work. He always let me help him, when I was old enough. But when I was little I remember crawling around under his workbench, looking at his feet. It always smelled just like this under there." He grinned, at her, at everything. "I'm bringing him up here next weekend. He's creaky, he'll have trouble getting up the stairs, but he'll want to see everything. He's jealous. I do for a living what he did for fun. Maybe you'd like to meet him."

"Sure," she said. "I love guys who use their parents to charm me." And she turned away, not letting him know whether she was encouraging him or not.

"So, Virgie, how are the kids?" Paula slung a box of tools into the back of the truck. Some of her older employees had warned her about doing that. One day, they said, something would just go *spoing* somewhere in her back, and she would never be the same again. It was inevitable, they said.

"Ah, those little monsters? Who gives a fuck? Let their dad pay for

their drugs, sex, and TV. He can afford it."

There was nothing affectionate in Virgie's tone. Paula glanced at her, a little frightened. Virgie had lost weight since the start of the project. Her round face had gained definition. Certainly, those hard lines had not been there before.

"Don't give me that 'bad mom' look, Paula honey. There's a point when you just have to cut your losses, right? You, of all people, should know all about it."

"Sorry. I didn't mean—"

"Oh, *I'm* sorry, Paula." Virgie leaned against the side of the panel truck and relaxed her shoulders. "Just, when I think about how long I worked for those miserable kids . . . you know, I can't remember a single time they were ever nice to me. Ever, from birth. Nasty, self-absorbed creatures. They got all their father's traits."

Paula stared at Virgie's red-angry face. Was this the woman who painted frescoes with her daughter and spent free afternoons cheering on her son's always-losing Little League team? No happy memories? She looked up at the now-beautiful Greek Revival house that stood in the squalor of Crow's Fields. She knew where memories came from.

"Leo?" She shouted up the dark stairs. She could hear him moving around up there, in his crisp new office.

"Come on up." His voice was calm.

The office had a low, sloping ceiling, and two dormer windows. Leo sat at a vast empty desk. And why should there be anything on it? Memories had no substance.

"Damn it." Paula's anger had grown as she climbed the stairs until it strained against the narrow walls of the house. "Can't you leave poor Virgie alone? Her life is damn hard enough as it is."

He looked at her. His eyes were red-rimmed, his gaze that of a tired and irritable pig.

"She just took the route you rejected," he said. "She felt like she was a duck imprinted on a boot, obsessed with it, thinking it was something other than what it clearly *was*. Biological, nothing she could do about it. By eliminating the releaser from her memories, I eliminated the imprinting as well. She's free now."

"Free to do *what*? You've eliminated a good chunk of her life. What did you replace them with?"

"TV." He grinned. He loved shoving the TV thing at her. "What else? Oh, a few generic bad child memories. I mostly stretched the ones she had to fill in the blanks. Now she doesn't mourn what happened. She is, instead, glad."

Paula slumped into a chair. "How could you do that?"

"She asked me," he said. "She paid me. I'm giving all your workers a deal. Good job on the house, they deserve it."

Paula had a lot of good memories of Rue, and a lot of bad ones as well. Should she give up the good ones, the ones Rue was taking with her to the Kaman-Trumbull-Ortega co-op? If she erased them here and Rue re-drew them there, then it would really be as if they had moved, flying like butterflies from one piece of reality to another.

"Oh, God," she said. "Rue won't remember a thing about me. I'll just disappear."

"You gave her *up*, didn't you? Without a fight. Someone else is going to create your daughter's life."

She remembered Mark's final look of disappointment. He had *wanted* her to fight, even if it led to nothing but pain. But she wanted only the best for her daughter. So she had let him have his way. Why should that so disappoint him?

"Yes, that's right," she said. "That's right. Do you have anything to drink in here?"

"Of course," he answered. "This is my office."

Bourbon, this time, not rum, but equally good. A few more days and the last details of the house would be complete. What would Leo do here then, sitting alone in his perfectly recreated structure?

"You're a failure, aren't you, Leo?"

"That's the thanks I get for giving you my whisky?" He drained his glass. "Damn right, I'm a failure. I'm reduced to sticking memories into the brains of divorced women, so that they have a decent explanation for their own misery. Sure, I stuck in a brilliant gleam of light from a broken glass, the sight of a child running freely away down a street lined with huge brick buildings, the complicated hasp of an old trunk in the attic . . . but do you think she'll ever notice? There's no point to art." He poured more, hand shaking. "I just fulfill requests. Dyeing Easter eggs, scraping wax off, the smell of a candle . . . I can do it. Make it realer than real. If the memory is bright enough, it can light up an entire life."

Of course it was Leo whom Kaman-Trumbull-Ortega had hired to modify Rue's memories. That was probably why he'd hired Paula Pursang Construction in the first place. He wanted to see the other side, the source for the memories he was reattaching. It was just a little game to him. What else did he have left to play?

"It really happened, Leo. I *know* it did. To me, if not to her." She even remembered being burned by a drop of boiling dye. The leftover colored powder was still somewhere in the back of a cabinet. She'd never thrown it out.

"I'm not saying it didn't." He had hunched his shoulders in expectation of a storm of rage from her. Her calmness surprised him. Jerkily, as if working corroded joints, he lowered his shoulders. "But the problem with memory is that people so seldom pay attention to what's really important. Life just slides by and leaves nothing behind it. So I have to boost

the memory up, make it real, something chewed and tasted before being swallowed. I'll work it. Don't worry." She wasn't used to seeing him nervous. The expression seemed oddly natural on his face. She wanted to see it there more often. "You won't be gone. . . ."

"Thanks for nothing, Leo. So I'll be there, somewhere, in the background of a nonexistent happy scene of dyeing Easter eggs. You're a genius. But why waste your time on me? Why don't you change your *own* past? You can be as artistic with that as you want."

"And live out my life with my memories my own fragile, brilliant creations? You don't know anything, Paula. Not a thing." He glared at her, but he had no power to frighten her anymore. "You want me to remember my great successes? Reality, sad to say, is pretty obdurate."

Paula stood up. "That's just what I wanted to hear, Leo. Just right. So, you're addicted to reality. It's too much for the *rest* of us, but *you*, you like the way you are, the way you turned out, despite the sad sickness of it all. You've failed at your art, but you like reality so much that you won't even give up that failure!"

"A damn shame," he said, setting his empty glass carefully down on the serenely empty desk. "But there it is. My painful secret."

Paula, unable to stand him any more, unable to look at him, left the house she had rebuilt and did not look back at it.

Summer had come and gone, and autumn was shaking the leaves from the trees. Paula Pursang stood at the top of a ladder in a place she didn't want to be, fixing something about the window frame . . . she had forgotten exactly what, or why it was thought appropriate that she be the one to do it. This wasn't her project. This wasn't her house.

Rue and her sister-in-memory Kali walked slowly together through the drying grass, deep in some discussion. If they had been laughing it would have been bad enough, but they seemed to be serious and intent, something much harder to create as the outburst of temporary and local energies.

Lightly and casually, Paula dropped down a few rungs on the ladder, away from the window that loomed so darkly above her. The two young women had stopped and were looking at something. Kali pointed.

Paula had, of course, finally slept with the handsome Nate Krivitsky, he of the blond forearm hair and the nice smell. And what do you know—nothing bad had happened and Nate still looked at her and all seemed well. His father had proved to be an amusing old man with gigantic eyebrows. He'd admired Paula's cabinet work.

Rue and Kali had crouched down. Something down in the high grass was fascinating. The quality of their attention was unusual. Did they realize that most of what they remembered was false? Did they long for actual experience? This one they shared for real. Did it seem clearer held

against the false ones, or, instead, did it seem cheap, poorly made?

Was what Paula remembered of Nate true? Did he exist? Or had she gone back to Leo, back to that house, and had the gentle Nate put in over something else, so that she could look back on at least one decent thing in her life? She would have to go back into the house to check . . . that was right, he wasn't there today. But his toolbox was. If she opened it and smelled the wood shavings, maybe she could convince herself it was all real. Reality, as Leo had said, was obdurate. She would have to hold on to it.

They were looking at a butterfly. Bright yellow, with black markings, a Tiger Swallowtail. At a butterfly and a dead squirrel. Paula could just see its ragged tail sticking out of the grass. The Swallowtail, perverse by human standards, was strongly attracted to carrion and manure.

Rue pursed her lips, staring at it. "I remember," she said. "A Tiger Swallowtail. My . . . someone told me once. I remember that."

"Rue." Kali's voice was serious. "Who is that woman?"

"What woman?"

Kali looked over her shoulder in elaborately obvious furtiveness. "The one who keeps looking at us."

"Oh, her." The Swallowtail, disturbed, fluttered up into the air, swirled lazily, was gone. "You'll get used to her. She's my guardian angel."

"Oh?" Kali said, and turned away. "Well, I don't think guardian angels should cry." ●

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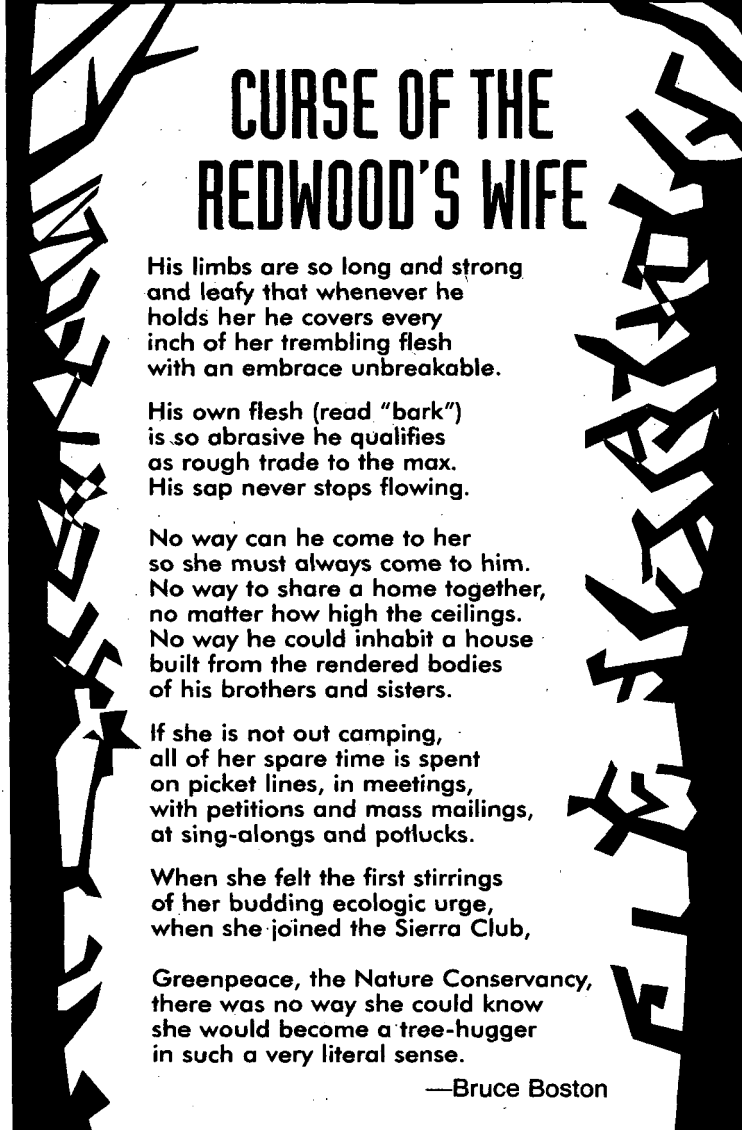


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CURSE OF THE REDWOOD'S WIFE

His limbs are so long and strong
and leafy that whenever he
holds her he covers every
inch of her trembling flesh
with an embrace unbreakable.

His own flesh (read "bark")
is so abrasive he qualifies
as rough trade to the max.
His sap never stops flowing.

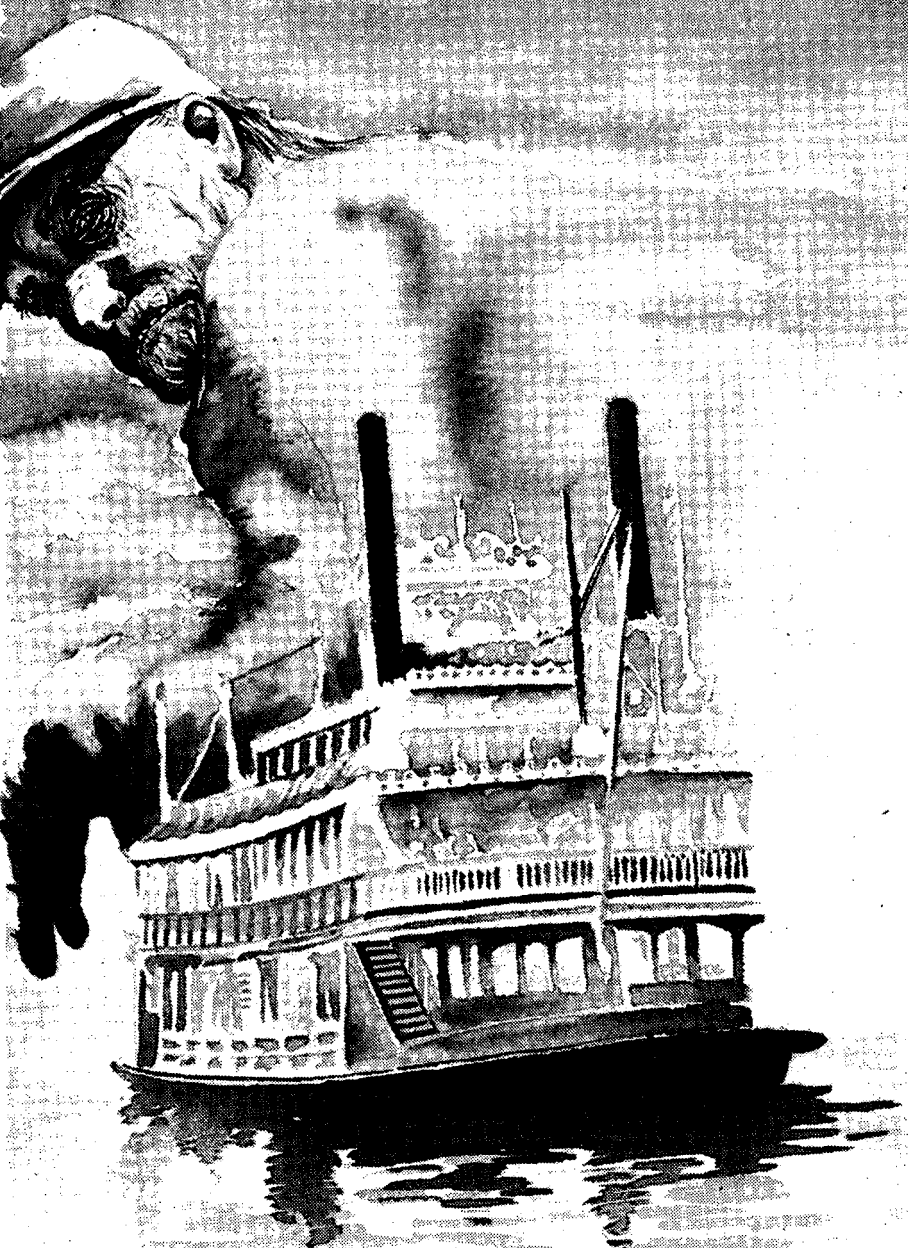
No way can he come to her
so she must always come to him.
No way to share a home together,
no matter how high the ceilings.
No way he could inhabit a house
built from the rendered bodies
of his brothers and sisters.

If she is not out camping,
all of her spare time is spent
on picket lines, in meetings,
with petitions and mass mailings,
at sing-alongs and potlucks.

When she felt the first stirrings
of her budding ecologic urge,
when she joined the Sierra Club,

Greenpeace, the Nature Conservancy,
there was no way she could know
she would become a tree-hugger
in such a very literal sense.

—Bruce Boston



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An ex-university professor finds
himself on a marvelous . . .

PASSAGE TO GALENA

Phillip C. Jennings

Illustration by Steve Cavallo

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needed a job. The governor sliced the University budget by twenty-seven million dollars. They closed the Linguistics Department. I had until the end of May to scrape *Roger MacEannin* off the door and vacate my office, with my last paycheck coming in June.

Cousin Tim was master chef on the *Calliope*. Winters were his vacation, when the river iced up. This January he was making the rounds of family and pre-out-of-the-closet friends.

Despite how I'd bossed him around in childhood (being four years older), he offered to help me. "Let's invent something for you to do," he told me as we browsed a 14th Avenue bookstore a few blocks from my doomed ivory tower. "You know how to use publication software? You can print menus and placecards, but that doesn't seem like much. Of course there's other office work. Correspondence, publicity, monitoring the radio."

For the first time in months, I took heart. My cousin was one of the grandest personages on board the *Calliope*, and he seemed to think she had room for me. According to the travel brochures, Tim's ship featured four gourmet meals a day, gorgeous views of the Minnesota-Wisconsin bluffs, and an occasional game of dollar-a-point poker. She looked like an old-time steamship, lots of cast aluminum gingerbread, her diesel engines hidden in the paddle boxes. Her route ran from St. Paul, Minnesota, to Galena, Illinois. Except for the eponymous whistle serenade every noon, the atmosphere was placid. Slot machines and hurly-burly were for the *other* ships.

I pawed through a bin of used Dorothy Sayers, three for a dollar. "Murder. I can script mysteries for your passengers to solve, like they do on that night train to Duluth." I had no experience directing plays, but I was ready to lie about that. I *needed* this job. Ex-assistant professors of linguistics glutted the academic market, and nobody was buying.

Tim answered with less than enthusiasm. "I wouldn't want anything that interfered with food service, Roger. They'd have to be quickie dramas that keep to schedule." He smiled. "—As if I'm the guy to talk to! I'll mention you to the captain."

He paused in self-debate and spoke again. "You'll wonder how Oscar keeps going financially. He's suggestible. Get him jazzed about this staged murder business, and next thing he'll hire some professional actors. He thinks he's made of money. He's pot-bellied and he drinks too much. He doesn't give a damn about dignity, and he leaves all the nautical stuff to his pilot, but just remember. To the crew he's Father-Son-and-Holy Spirit. All he asks is that we live in his universe. We'd be ungrateful not to feel protective about him."

"I should keep him from spending too much? You don't want Drama to take away from Cookery?" I spoke with a smile and my face was all sunshine above the beard, but I knew Tim. He got his way on sheer charm, or by any other means necessary, but he got his way.

He shrugged. "You'll see. I hope you like him. I think you will."

Later that month I got a crank call from a drunk Norwegian farmer, lots of bluster and muddled syntax. It was my interview. Next Thursday a letter offered a fair salary and decent benefits. The ice thawed. Campus trees began to bud. I packed my post-divorce belongings and rented a storage hut in a City-of-the-Dead in North Minneapolis, a place near the freeway with its own streets and lights, and units big enough for my Honda.

A grad student gave me a ride to a fancy restaurant across from the Ordway in downtown St. Paul. Tim took me in tow and made a few introductions. We reached Oscar; dress suit, suspenders, belly and all, a combination of W.C. Fields and Elmer Fudd. "Good, good! So you're Roger. *Jolly* Roger I hope! You gotta meet Dennis. He's done this shit before—dinner theater murder mysteries. He's got scripts you can look at. We'll find volunteers from the crew for a few of the slots. Dennis and his wife Sophie are gonna play like they're passengers."

I was obviously too late to talk Captain Oscar out of spending money on actors. Dennis opened his handsome mouth and began to talk. My role shrank as his expanded. "We want to take advantage of the physical plant, and let the audience into parts of the ship that are otherwise off limits. That calls for a lot of clever writing, new flesh on old plot skeletons. When we get to know our troupe, we'll enlarge some roles and make other changes."

As if the scenes I'd scribbled between my seminars and committee meetings didn't exist at all! But then Sophie came along and touched Dennis's elbow. The guy angled sideways, and we got our first eyefulls of each other.

Somebody should have played Wagner. It was one of those moments. Sophie and I found ourselves assigned neighboring seats at the table. "Greek or Russian?" I asked after a peck at my salad.

Her eyes flashed. "Born in Odessa. I don't know what that makes me in another ten years." She nodded at Tim and her earrings tinkled. "He's your cousin? He's very handsome."

"Yes," was my minimal answer. Was I so ugly? Granted, I was six inches shorter and not nearly so blond. . . .

"My husband will be courting him every spare moment," she whispered. "Is Tim gay, by any chance?"

"When we were kids I made him play Dale Evans to my Roy Rogers. I guess it's my fault," I theorized. "The experience must have unhinged him."

Sophie smiled and the temperature of the room shot up ten degrees. "They'll make a happy pair," she said as I reached for a cooling gulp of wine. "Are you still Roy Rogers, Roger? Men your age usually have inconveniences."

"Wives? None at the moment." I wasn't ready to go into my life history.

I'd make better time as an enigma than as a tiresome victim of the female sex. My God, this was really happening, and we hadn't even reached the Chicken Kluski Polonnaise. At this rate, by the time we got to the Baked Alaska she'd be pregnant.

Well, no. We had four days in an elegant revamped hotel for that, four days of preparation for the "new season," while a mile away and steeply downhill, the *Calliope* got a fresh spring coat of paint.

Dennis and I muddled through a few trial-and-error rehearsals. Oscar took me off to teach me how to use the ship's radio, an artifact that took up three-fourths of its own closet. "I want you to post daily news bulletins, like they do on ocean liners." Every stateroom had a clock-radio. All the passengers had to do was tune in La Crosse or Dubuque, but Oscar was a romantic. His grin told me everything. If running a riverboat wasn't fun, it wasn't worth doing.

Sophie had an "old friend" who kept her from my door until the third night, when she showed up with wine and made me fall in love with her. I recognized the disease the way winter Minnesotans recognize the flu.

I might take revenge, and publish the shape of her breasts, and her natural hair color, and other features of her private anatomy—*true* stuff, when lies were her business. She layered herself in exaggerations. We shed clothes toward the above-mentioned nudity, and I listened to Sophie talk about Broadway and London and her Hollywood offers—the ones that would have made her a star, if she hadn't gotten into a commitment that sent her to Israel.

"Three years! Now I have to rebuild my career," she explained, drinking her booze with a nervous enthusiasm that told me she was lying about being so utterly promiscuous. More make-believe! She was a flirt, but the physical part was a little daunting. For a time she avoided the bed. When I touched her I felt tension.

Finally, though . . .

Afterward I changed, the way men do. Suddenly I had scruples. I couldn't bear to hear Sophie spin new inventions, to retreat beneath her masks. I wanted the last half-hour of hot, moist honesty to go on, and that meant talking about other people than herself.

I might not have bothered. I nearly fell out of love when Sophie laid into Captain Oscar. "His publicity is so bad! He prints up a run of brochures, and leaves them at a few agencies—no radio, no television! He says he advertises in the magazines, but have you ever seen anything?"

"He gets good repeat trade," I muttered sleepily, remembering something Tim had told me.

"This is a dead end. Dennis was a fool to sign on. I could have had a part at the Guthrie. Hell, maybe I still can. This showboat gig is only for the summer."

Attacking Oscar was attacking the premise that I'd really have a job, and money, and security. I was worried enough about all those things without Sophie goading me into despondency. I decided it would be wise to wind up this affair as quickly as possible, but then I chastised myself. My conscience spoke, the original Mr. Nice. I was being a typical male—love 'em and leave 'em! Maybe I was shallow. I couldn't help that, but did I have to be a shallow *asshole*?

Deep in her twisted Slavic soul, Sophie didn't like herself, but what was her crime, other than diverting me when I needed all my wits to learn my new life? That's what a ship-job is like. You can't go home and put on a different personality after five o'clock. Forget about eight-hour days. Like Oscar says, if it's not fun, find something else to do.

Next morning I was miserable. My mail had gotten forwarded. Among the junk was a letter from my ex-wife, wondering where her check was. "Am I supposed to drop out of school because you can't keep your promises?"

In time my post-coital gloom wore off. After my afternoon workout with the *Calliope's* radio, I rewarded myself with a tour of the hurricane deck and saw a limousine drive down the river road. It stopped and a giant got out of the back, a permanently hunched giant with elephant-gray skin and the most prognathous jaw I'd seen outside of museum portraits of the Habsburg emperors. He retrieved one piece of luggage, a huge pet-carrier, and hauled some shadowy, collie-sized creature up the ship's gang-plank while the painters stopped to stare at him.

Oscar tapped me from behind. "That's the pilot," he explained. He wanted to say more, but he couldn't figure how. He hemmed and hawed and worked his lips for ten seconds, and then sent me back to the hotel.

When I trudged into the lobby the guy at the desk waved me over and gave me a packet. By the time I reached the elevator I'd torn off the wrapper. There they were, three used science fiction books and a note from Tim.

"Dear Roger: Space travel is magic, isn't it?" he began. "All the latest writers get you off Earth okay, rockets and so forth, but then they wave their hands and twitter about hyperspace. Don't you think if hyperspace was possible, you could do it spang from Arizona to Barsoom, without Cape Canaveral?"

Weird. I hadn't known that Tim was a literary fussbudget. If he didn't go for these books, why dump them on me? When I bothered with the twentieth century, my tastes ran to Sharpe and Waugh and Wodehouse, Durrell and Vidal. One of Tim's books had an Uncle Hugo's bookmark. *The Princess of Mars* started with this wild Apaches scene. . . .

An hour later my stomach brought me back to reality. I went downstairs. Passing the lobby on the way to the restaurant, I saw a small crowd at the registration desk.

Gobs of hotels were built around the Twin Cities the last twenty years. These straitened times the ambitiously big ones were tombs poised on bankruptcy. We'd gotten used to having free run of this place and its echoing hallways, without sharing it with others, and I was curious about what I suspected was some new convention.

I looked for placards. Oscar came in the door. "Hey! You old sonavabitch!" The new folks converged like a family reunion, the black woman with the scholarly demeanor, and the Buffalo Bill in cowboy boots, and the bouffant lady in the tight sheath miniskirt. The Chinese couple were more reserved, but Oscar made his way over and shook hands. He exchanged kisses with the big Irish washerwoman in the clerical collar.

More crewmembers? I found familiar faces in the restaurant. I asked, and found out. "Passengers. You'll see the same gang all summer, dropping off and coming on again a few weeks later."

There was something artificial about this explanation. It was careful and evasive, spoken while my dinnertime sources exchanged glances with each other. The more I pondered, the weirder it got.

Passenger loyalty, taken to an extreme. Was Tim's cooking *that good*? I'd enjoyed it on occasion, but I wouldn't have sacrificed my summers for it, even if I were rich. Anyhow, a crowd of gourmets? By St. Paul standards most of these new folks were skinny.

After my meal I went for a stroll around the plaza. When I re-entered the hotel the lobby crowd had spread, claiming various territories. Crew members mingled with passengers. I saw scattered heaps of Banana Republic luggage, sufficient for Arctic expeditions and African safaris. There was an unhurried air of excitement. I nosed toward the loudest conversation, sat, and pretended to mind my own business.

"... Masrun, just north of the Abway. Linda found some indigenous ruins up the right-hand tributary. We figure a few jazz tapes will do the trick now that the Empire's getting electricity, but the big question is voltage."

The woman tapped her husband's arm and he went into whisper mode. Tim stepped into view. He peered around, and came over. "I left a message for you. Do we need to talk?"

"You mean, about the fact that reality is getting too colorful?" I answered. "Is it always like this?"

"I've been Oscar's chef for six years." Tim sat and took breath. "Maybe this is my last season. I'm tired of touch-and-go from one riverbank to the next. I want to stay somewhere. I want to do some swashbuckling and be a hero."

I looked at him with my face quirked. He spoke on. "I was in a religious cult back in the 70s. Remember? Shaved head and chanting and dancing around?" Tim asked. "I learned how to cook while making love-feasts, all sorts of fried veggie num-nuns. When we broke up I got murder threats.

I took the worst letters to the FBI. They didn't do a damned thing. Cults weren't on their agenda."

(Yes, my cousin's life had been interesting. Tall blond twinkly-eyed hunks are allowed to breeze through adventures daunting to the rest of us, but what was he getting at?)

"None of *this* stuff is on their agenda either," Tim explained. "You've figured out that we're up to something, and you've got this idea that the U.S. Army is going to haul ass and muck around, because that's how it is in the movies. I can't tell you how careful we were six years ago, thanks to Oscar's libertarian politics, but it doesn't make any difference, careful or not."

Tim laughed. "Christopher Columbus discovered America. It didn't matter that Icelanders had done it centuries before, or that Cornish and Basque sailors had been fishing the Grand Banks of Newfoundland the previous seventy years. They didn't have government backing, so they weren't official.

"We're not official either. *Not one government* pays attention to us. Not the U.S. of A., or the Empire of Gentiam, or Sa Tlan, or the Land of the Cat People. Thank God for that, because it's made us rich. I'm a millionaire, did you know? Barely a millionaire, unlike our more fortunate passengers, but it's a nice nest egg."

My face froze to hear my cousin rant like this. Sweet Jesus—all those pretend games of childhood; cowboys, Tarzan, pirates, Nazis, spaceships and ghost-monsters. They'd stuck with him somehow. "Cat People!" Talk about pathologies! First poor Sophie and her Hollywood chimeras, and now this.

I sighed inside my soul. I had too much respect for Tim to call him a liar, and anyhow my shipboard role was to encourage a sort of fantasy. Yeah! It came to me then. Somehow a group of people had agreed among themselves about what the *Calliope* was supposed to be—a river steamer up the barely-explored Nile or the Amazon, encountering exotic realms and trafficking in ivory, apes and peacocks.

I was willing to bet that a certain amount of science fiction entered in, enough to "explain" how Dubuque wasn't Dubuque at all. I asked about that. "How does it work? How do you, uh, transmogrify yourselves to these other places?"

Tim shrugged. "We don't know. It's the pilot who does it, and she's a master at talking in circles. You'll meet her after we launch."

"Her? I've seen *him* already. He's a big gray giant in a cloth cap."

"That's her carrier. We call him Punjab." Tim smiled. He'd made a fast recovery. "You're not buying this, are you?"

I blushed and nodded. "I just want to know how to act. I'm willing to play along if the money's good."

Tim opened his wallet, and flashed a wad of green. "We need recruits.

People start as crew and graduate to passengers when they fall in love with one place or the other. Time goes on, and they drop from sight. Sometimes they have accidents, and sometimes they lose interest in twentieth century Earth, so we hire a few new oddballs every season. We rescue them from this grim, over-populated world of narrowing opportunities. This year it's you, Roger. You and Dennis, and Sophie."

"The murder mystery business is just a cover? Is that why Oscar doesn't care how bad we are?"

"You'll get better," Tim said. He laughed again. "Ah, Roger. This is the first miracle that's ever happened to you. You're older than I was. It's got to be hard on your head. You think I'm a candidate for the loony bin."

As he spoke he shot me the same look of microwave-intensity love Dustin Hoffmann gave the girl in that *Tootsie* movie. I melted just like she did. "Nine o'clock tomorrow morning," he begged. "Bear with us these next fourteen hours, until we cast off. Fourteen hours for old time's sake, and then I promise things will get easier."

Fourteen hours gave me barely time after breakfast to locker my bags and scoot up to the radio room just below the pilothouse. I was juiced for the moment the engines revved. Soon I'd escape my mail, which would have a *particularly* hard time tracking me if I was off to visit Lost Continents. The old *Calliope* tootled, and we started the shakedown run from downtown St. Paul to the Lake Street bridge. Not having anything better to do, I went outside to gawk at the scenery. Woody vistas drifted by, and the odd marina or tank farm. As we passed Fort Snelling I went down from the texas deck to pee, and heard the *second* set of engines cut in.

Back outside I learned we were making steam for the serenade when we returned to the docks to pick up passengers. Oscar chucked a thumb at the pilothouse. "She only plays when we're not moving."

"Our pilot?"

Oscar cleared his throat evasively. "Tim said he talked to you last night. How do you think Dennis and Sophie will take the news?"

Shit. I was going to have to make noises. With the murder game I'd get to chew the fat with people who knew I wasn't Officer Cottswold, but this other fantasy gimmick was a hundred percent full time.

Ignorance was bliss. I'd spare Sophie a day or two. "Don't tell them," I suggested.

Oscar chuckled. "Most people don't know a damn about geography. We had passengers all over that hotel talking about pilgrimages to Wibem Acca, and what to do if you run into hivepups, and I bet that pretty pair never gave it a thought. You know what it is? *Urbanity*. A disease of too many people. Folks learn to tune things out. This is a tuned-out civilization." He reached into his coat pocket. "Want a snort?"

I shared a snort with my captain. The *Calliope* churned a tight circle and began our return south. "When's it happen?" I asked. "When do we, uh . . . go to those other places?"

"You're the eager one. We'll pass Red Wing first. We'll catch a view of my old apple farm. The one I had before I got into this line of work."

He paused. I was supposed to respond to this biographical gambit, but I couldn't make myself do it. It's always a chess game, talking to bullshit artists. If you're really into it, you push to snare them in elaborate contradictions, but in this case I hadn't been asked to play. I'd been conscripted, and Oscar knew that.

"I got a problem," he went on. "Last year we took on a guy and I stood up here with him just like now. He said he'd quit unless I proved we weren't just a shipload of lunatics. Soon as we lowered the gangplank to board our passengers he'd take off, and good riddance to all our rubbish."

He sighed, took another snort, capped the flask and put it away. "I took him up to meet Nastassia, tail, fur, and all. Guess what he did then?"

I cleared my throat. This stuff was getting to me. A hint of cat musk floated above all these river smells. "He took off anyhow," I said, knowing that part of it must be true.

"He sure did. With him I couldn't win. Afterward I worried he might blow the whistle on us, but that never happened."

I imagined myself running ashore and calling for an appointment with the FBI. Or my lawyer. I imagined how they'd react to this poor ex-professor, homeless and hectored, ranting about breach-of-promise suits and illegal alien catwomen. Would they play along with me to the extent of opening a lawbook? Would they tell me that as far as anyone knew, it was perfectly legal for the *Calliope* to go wandering into Never-Neverland?

Hah! They'd show me the door, and then I'd be nowhere. I was one decision from becoming a street person. The thought made me shiver. "We can put off Nastassia until after the apple farm," I told Oscar. I'd taken the symbolic step into the world of make believe. Now I was ready to play. "So tell me, how did you get to be a riverboat captain?"

I did my work the rest of the day, menus and radio bulletins, and took a break around Red Wing to gaze at the shores, bluffs green with new spring vigor, haloed by the gold of the westering sun. Goaded by the foolishness around me, by stories of English-speaking Gents of the year 1127 (after the birth of their prophet Muggleton) and how they lived among bald-headed Cilni, perfidious Shan, and quasi-Moslem Tarf (Ye Gods! These cultures weren't even *original*!)—goaded by these natterings, at long last my soul woke from a decade of ethical slumber. Thoughts ran through my head like buzzing bees, thoughts about heroism and human duty.

I was going to do my job and play Oscar's game. It was too late to change that, but nevertheless I had to discover the morality of what I was up to. Or the immorality.

Here we were, a boatload of rich people (so Tim had said), pretending we were embarked on a magic adventure. Add us together and we came to thousands of squandered work-hours.

Like any Renaissance Festival. Like Disney World. Like the hours wasted on the pyramids of ancient Egypt. Every civilization has its monument: The Hagia Sophia, or the Louvre. When future archaeologists dig around central Florida, they'll find that what we loved most wasn't our God, or our King, or our Art.

We, the People of these United States, spent money on *ourselves*. Carnivals. Fun. Are we evil? Is there something better? Not having anything better is our ultimate bankruptcy.

Half of me spoke in a voice from America's Puritan past, ready to raise the banner of God. Against that banner I mustered the loving, human faces of Cousin Tim and Captain Oscar—but now I was playing a game with adjectives. *God* was loving, and Tim and Oscar had flaws. They had bought me with money, and only afterward opened their purposes to me.

God meant us to feed the hungry, and heal the sick.

God gave us the urge to create. To escape. To tell fabulous stories.

God canceled Himself out. Maybe He didn't exist. If only I'd seen His Grace at work, or felt it inside me—but God rarely visits linguistics professors who worship at the temple of statistics. Maybe I should get myself a bottle of wine and sit down in front of the *Calliope's* word processor. If I wrote everything out, it would come untangled. I'd reach some kind of inner profundity.

I began this opus a few hours later, after my first stint as Officer Cottswold, which didn't come off so badly as I'd feared. My theatrical success gave me status in Sophie's eyes and made me cheerful. I wrote in an upbeat expansive mood, gradually cooling down as the wine level sank and it became clear I wasn't going to meet my deadline.

The world needs a form of punctuation for irony, something like quotation marks. A while ago I could have said «our cat-pilot Nastassia is going to play her whistles at two A.M., and make hyperspace music, and transmogrify us to the Five Realms of Melnesia. If I'm to pack this into an empty winebottle and throw it overboard, I'd better hurry.»

«Oops. Too late.» *Much* too late by now. People live on the shores of Lake Pepin, no matter how low and marshy this region is, where the Mississippi loses momentum and spreads wide. I think there'll be a call or two to the county sheriff about our weirdly harmonized Hearts-of-Space noise in the middle of the night.

I hadn't thought about turning my treatise on ethical vacuity into a let-

ter to my ex-wife, but maybe I'll address it to her. I owe her an explanation. There'll be a few delayed checks, and I can't think of another person on Earth who has her motivation to track me if I get in trouble. Whoever you are reading these pages, please post them to the address at the end. It comes to \$1.01 in stamps, and I've enclosed two dollars.

Melody? Like I say, I didn't have you in mind. That stuff about Sophie wasn't meant to jab you. But if you have the least question whether I'm really traveling to lost worlds on the spaceship *Calliope*, to sell paperbacks on the black market and get rich like Cousin Tim, don't give it another thought. "Nastassia" played her transmogrification-serenade twenty minutes ago, just before this sudden rainstorm. The fact that my epic has reached you (as I hope it will) is proof it's all a charade.

I haven't met her yet. I avoided the pilot-in-a-cat-suit scene—I had a sudden call of nature. Maybe tomorrow.

After writing something as long as this, it wasn't easy to quit. I should have logged off. I needed a few hours rest, but the devil at the back of my brain insisted I apologize to future readers for the fact that these pages would soon smell like cheap burgundy, and I kept tapping away. Irony demanded that I really send a message-in-a-wine-bottle, but I planned to print a second copy and mail it from La Crosse, if we were allowed to use something as mundane as a postbox during this bizarre voyage.

"Odd about the rain," I keyed, still unwilling to shut down and get some rest. "It's really pounding out there. The weather service on the radio predicted fair weather." I reached to twiddle the dial. Damn—I couldn't raise anyone. Here I was surrounded by a closetful of fancy equipment. What the hell happened to my 24-hour stations? All I got was gobbledygook on the wrong frequency.

I shook my head. This was crazy. Everyone else on the ship was long since in bed. I *had* to make myself stop. Come on, Roger! Hit that old F7 button, and log off!

No, wait! That sounded like Sophie, minus the Slavic accent, a husky whisper transmitting at one of those frequencies normal radios can't get: *"—two point three. Acknowledge, eighty-two point three Preston. All right, don't acknowledge, dammit! Preston, Preston. Oh two thirty-eight and still no answer. I'm going to invoke Condition Red on the theory that we are now extraterritorial."*

"Last chance countdown; ten nine eight seven six five four three two one oh fuck I can't believe this is real. Four years on the Bureau kook squad and we've got a real ETE for the first time. Condition Red and arming. See ya later."

I stood up and ran fingers through my hair. I heard someone jog by and up the near stairs to the texas deck. I opened the radio room door to a faceful of rain. What the heck, I was drenched already—I followed.

I climbed. Sophie grabbed me from behind. "So who the hell are *you* working for?"

I fumbled for an answer. "Nobody." My look of innocent stupidity convinced her.

"We've got to get back to the real world, okay?" she continued, wet hair plastered to her skull. A few last rivulets of mascara streamed down her cheeks. "Do you understand?" she insisted on asking. "Are you with me? Here, take a look."

She showed me her badge. The gun in her other hand was equally impressive. I was glad she didn't aim it at me. "I need your services as a loyal American."

"Uh, yeah." If ever there was a time to argue, this wasn't it.

"Okay, get ahead of me. Up into the pilothouse. You're my shield, so no fancy moves."

I led the way to a place I'd successfully avoided since we'd left Saint Paul. The steps into the pilothouse were ladderlike and steep, and rose through an open trapdoor into a dark reek that almost made me sneeze. "Eh, ah—excuse me?"

"Yessth?"

I peered toward a dark and fuzzy shape up by the wheel. "Are you, ah—"

"Quiet," Sophie ordered from behind. "Let's get some light. Where's your carrier, Nastassia? Where's *Punjab*?"

"He sleepsth, like most humansth."

"Good. One less critter to worry about. Now we want you to turn around and get us back to Earth, and I've got a gun in case you haven't noticed."

"I see, yesth, but not fffrom here." The pilot's voice was calm, almost hypnotic. "Not back to Earth, essept ffrom one sspot on the Masrun river, by the ruinsth of the Magay Ka. I'll need to reverse coursth. It will take time. Maybe an hour againstht the flow of the river."

"Okay, lady. Head us around. And get some lights on," Sophie repeated.

"No can do, or my night vision goesth. We'll run aground." The pilot's fuzzy shadow included a tail, and it lashed emphatically, the one part of her that wasn't calm at all.

"Jesus. Night vision in this rain? Is that what you critters depend on?" Sophie spoke and sneezed. "Ahh-CHOO! God dammit, I'm allergic to you. Four years in the kook squad, and my first alien hits my sinuses like nothing going—Roger, get over there to the left. See she doesn't do anything fancy. I've got to open this window and get some air in here."

"Are you really with the government?" I asked. "Dennis too?"

Sophie shook her head. "Ah-Ah-CHOO! We hired Dennis out of a community theater in Connecticut. Part of my cover. We knew something im-

portant was going on here—this ship had to do with a lot of gold bullion that was coming on the market; gold in alloys you get with melted coins.

"Ah-CHOO! Ah-CHtt! And of course we had the usual kook reports. This is major, Roger. Think about it! New worlds! Christopher Columbus all over again! Tonight proves it. Now I've got to get back with the apparatus, and Miss Cat Lady over there. She knows how to run it."

"It doesthn't belong to you," our pilot said. "It doesthn't belong to your world, or your sthpecies."

"It will by the time we're done with you. Ah-CHOO!"

Sophie wiped her nose and turned to shove at the stubborn window-latch she'd been working on. I'd seen it in movies. Swift chop down on the gun hand while the villain was distracted. Of course, this was real life, and it was dark, and I hadn't rehearsed. Sophie's gun *didn't* go banging to the floor. I concentrated on holding her arm so she couldn't shoot anybody, tightening my hammy hand around her elegant wrist. She whunked me one in the groin that paralyzed half my body and almost popped my eyes out of their sockets.

I vanished into my pain, and beneath a weight of fur that collapsed us both to the pilothouse deck. The rollabout catfight lasted a minute and left my clothes in shreds, and much of my skin as well.

Responding to a secret alarm, Punjab and Captain Oscar huffed into the pilothouse. Sophie quit struggling and the Cat Woman opened her jaws to let go of her neck. "She's from the Bureau kook squad," I wheezed, plucking up her weapon. "Oscar, it looks like the U.S. government's on to you."

"Shit. I didn't think they were that smart. Are you okay?"

"I don't know. I don't know. Jesus."

"Interfering with Federal business is a felony offense," Sophie said nastily. She rubbed her neck and hauled up onto her knees. "Ah-CHOOff!"

"Not here it ain't," Oscar answered. "Not in the Empire of Gentiam. Your authority is zilch and down in Wibem Acca a guy named Master Thutto owes me a favor."

"Don't take that attitude," Sophie said. "You try going back to Saint Paul, Captain. Ah-CHOO. There'll be questions. They'll ooze over you like butter on toast. Ah-Ah-CHOO. Ah-CHtt. Ah-CHOO!"

"Let's get Sophie away from here," I suggested. "Make sure she doesn't have any concealed weapons. We'd better tie her up."

"Hey Roger, good to have you on our side!" Oscar said. His face was split by a grin I could see even in the dark.

"Yeah? Well, I guess we're screwed now, huh?" I answered glumly. "Maybe Planet Earth needs whatever technology is involved in this. God, if I'd had time to think things out—"

"Earth *über allesth*? Sso you can do to usth what Columbus did to your Indians?" Nastassia the Cat Lady asked. "Give usth some time, at leasth."

December 1995

You're sssso far ahead in mosth things; population and war, and industhtry. The worldsth of the Great Song are never evenly matched. Dark agesth come in cyclesth. Now you're at a major peak and we're down, and it wouldn't be fffair."

Oscar patted my back in a companionable manner and I tried not to whimper from the pain. I smelled whiskey on his breath. "Roger, the Cat People don't understand their technology. It's left over from some previous cycle. They've got their own world to recolonize. You don't have to worry, America's not gonna get invaded. Hey, lissen to your boss. *Nobody's* gonna get invaded, huh? This is private stuff. Private forever."

"I suppose. Let's sort this out later." I was on the verge of collapse. "Tomorrow, huh?"

"Tomorrow. Big day. I'll wake you up, you fuckin' hero! The Hoodoo have a trading post and you're not gonna want to miss that. Boy, them Hoodoo women! We'll make sure they treat you special!"

I tottered down the stairs. The rain was slacking off. Something crashed through the vegetation on the shore to my left. I heard the excited yips and yammers of God-knows-how-many hunting dogs. Their noise was drowned out when their prey *roared* like nothing ever found in Minnesota. All this drama was concealed beneath trees that must have been two hundred feet high, with the straight trunks of pine or redwood.

I could barely see the outlines. No farmhouse lights. No skyglow from Winona up ahead. Something big and white whooshed overhead. I must have made it to bed at last, I don't remember how. I don't remember what the others did with Sophie. Writers say explorers on Mars won't dream at night, because they won't need to. Those next hours I didn't dream at all.

I woke to a mottled orange sun, shining into my cabin window. The engines were gearing down like we were about to dock. I got up stiffly as an old man and started dressing for my new life. ●

We appreciate comments about the magazine, and would like to hear from more of our readers. Editorial correspondence should include the writer's name and mailing address, even if you use e-mail. Letters can be e-mailed to 71154.662@compuserve.com or posted to Letters to the Editor, *Asimov's*, 1540 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10036. Letters may be shortened and edited for publication. The e-mail address is for editorial correspondence *only*—questions about subscriptions should be directed to Box 5130, Harlan, IA 51593-5130.

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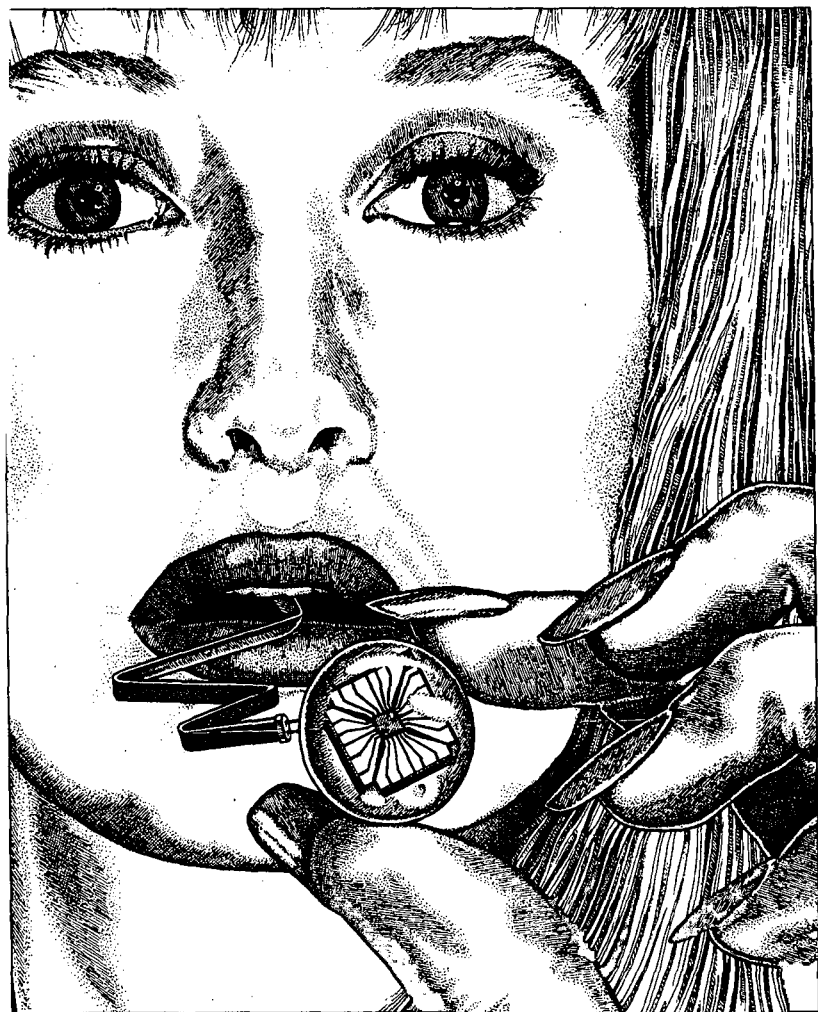
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

A mysterious stranger offers Sue Marie much more than the gift of . . .

TONGUES

Robert Reed

Illustration by Ron Chironna



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She Marie says, "Hello," in several languages.
No response.

Settling on the most popular dialect of *New Reformed American*, she says, "I'd love to help you, sir." Then she remembers to smile, adding, "Is there anything I can do? Anything at all?"

The customer is a little man, not fat but showing symptoms. He smiles in return, though his expression is unsettling, too many bright teeth beneath large staring eyes. He's not one of their regulars, she knows. His wrinkled clothes and unkempt air have her worried. A transient? A madman? Some forgotten boyfriend? The eyes cut clean through her, and he inhales, rising up on his toes, a complex, watery voice muttering the word, "Tongues," in some flavor of *New Reformed American*.

He means the store, she assumes.

"Tongues For All Tastes. Yes, sir." They're only the largest chain of language stores in the world. Hoping he can understand her dialect, she asks, "What can we do for you today?"

The expression drifts into unexplained amusement.

"Would you like to browse?" She hopes that's all he wants. "Or are you hunting something specific?"

A one-word answer. "Specific."

Which means she has to accompany him as he wanders down the wide main aisle. On one side, set on long self-dusting shelves, are the latest, flashiest examples of language hardware. Perhaps this customer, against all appearances, has money. He does seem interested in the displays, pausing before an assortment of acorn-sized implants. With hopefulness, she asks, "Are you considering an upgrade?"

The man makes a vague sound, fingering one of the display models.

"We offer every thousand-tongue implant on the market today," she boasts. "We've even got the new 2001 from Apple."

Is he listening to her?

"Flexible credit terms," she offers. Just this morning, their manager gave his famous sell-more-hardware, that's-where-the-money-lives speech. With that in mind, she says, "A few dollars down, and a modest monthly payment."

"Few" and "modest" are vague words in any language.

But the customer ignores the bait, drifting down the aisle, pausing before the next set of shelves. "A new larynx, perhaps." The odd smile resurfaces, eyes twinkling. Assuming some type of larynx trouble—that would explain his silence—she says, "We have whatever suits your needs."

Larynxes mean profits.

"As it happens, and today only, we have a special deal. A larynx and its matching ears for 10 percent off." From a 40 percent markup, it's a special deal for the store. "You do need the best of both. So many of these

modern languages are set at such high pitches, you have to be augmented or be a dog to even hear them."

A noncommittal nod, then he drifts toward the eyes.

Eyes are very, very profitable.

"This year's models," she boasts. "Better vision, superior pattern recognition. You'll be able to read at twice your current speed, guaranteed."

But not in any legal sense.

"That model is a Sony Delight. Doesn't it look real?"

The customer says, "No."

In truth, she agrees. And the people who wear them seem to keep them half-closed, as if having a hawk's vision is too much to bear.

Cocking his head at an angle, he laughs, saying, "I see you."

As a reflection in the displayed eye, she realizes.

"Sad girl," he says.

Or did he?

Before she can decide what she heard, the customer wheels around and crosses the main aisle, calling back at her, "Come! Come!"

She follows, at a distance.

He pauses at the bestseller shelves, fondling the top copy of *Modern Cosmology*. Inside a sealed plastic sphere is a one-use, self-obliterating chip that will teach its user a brand new language—vocabulary and grammar—in just minutes. Or more correctly, the chip teaches the implant that is set within a reconstructed sinus cavity, and that implant is linked to its owner's language centers.

In truth, Sue Marie doesn't understand the technologies.

Yet she knows her products. *Modern Cosmology* is an esoteric language purchased for no reason but status, mastered but rarely used. A blend of mathematics, exotic physics, and invented words, it allows its user to comprehend the beginnings and ends of the universe. There are a hundred words for protons, none for human beings. Sue Marie doesn't own anything like it. The principle of the thing leaves her cold.

Waving the chip in the air, the customer says, "Mine."

"Many like it," she lies, thinking that he is odd enough, perhaps, to enjoy *Cosmology*.

But no, he shakes his head. He has been misunderstood. Touching the big screen above the shelf, he calls up the promotional material, pausing at its author's biography. The photograph looks rather like him. The author's name is Michael Weil. "Me," says the watery voice, flat and without pride, but never simple.

"Maybe it is," Sue Marie sputters.

A hearty nod.

If so, she thinks, he's lost some weight.

"Mine," he repeats, setting the chip back on the shelf, right next to *A million ways to say—I LOVE YOU*.

Long, careful looks at the photograph and customer, and she realizes this isn't a disgusting, impoverished nobody. Greed surges, speeding up her heart. "Congratulations! Mr. Weil, is it?" She licks her lips, then says, "I didn't know you lived in our area, I'm sorry—"

"No," he says.

He says, "I travel. Wandering, I am."

And he's worth millions, she knows. With each breath and every twitch of her mouth, she hopes for the best. "Well, sir, if you're thinking about staying in town, I can sell you our standard package of dialects." She gestures at a map hanging on the nearest wall. The metro area is broken into twenty-plus neighborhoods, some of the boundaries clear, others vague. "We have interesting local dialects, if you ask me. Unique, but not too unique." A pause. "For instance, we're in the Dundee neighborhood now. Established, upper middle-class. We have a sophisticated vocabulary. In Dundee, we use the names of famous painters to describe the weather." She glances outside, saying, "Monet."

The millionaire seems intrigued, but with what?

After a long silence, he says, "Talk more."

She can almost see herself reflected in his grinning teeth. "Well, since you're traveling . . . wandering . . . and if you're planning to stay here in the Midwest . . . nobody else has our selection of registered Midwestern tongues."

Mr. Weil gives an odd little laugh.

Sue Marie's optimism slips into concern. In reflex, she descends into her most ominous voice. "If you're planning to travel west from here, you should be warned: The Indians want you to speak their tribal languages, which of course is their right on their own lands."

Silence.

"I can give you the entire package. Pawnee. Omaha. Lakota. All of the important ones—"

"No," he interrupts. "Thank you."

"Or if you're going overseas. . . !" She gestures at a world map, the black-shaded areas showing where *New Reformed American* is illegal. "A friend of mine just went to France and got ticketed for using the wrong kind of Parisian—"

He touches her, the hand dry and soft. "No. Thank you."

Why is his voice slow? Sue Marie knows quite a few language junkies, their implants filled to capacity. Most have two or three implants stuck into their poor sinuses. But they talk fast, not slow, always sounding as if they're suffering from horrid colds.

Mr. Weil rises up on his toes, then says, "So many tongues."

Tens of thousands are in stock. The rest can be special ordered, usually in minutes. There are professional tongues, hobby tongues, tongues designed for efficiency and others meant to be sloppy and rambling. "For

all tastes," she mutters, trying to remember when that play on words was genuinely humorous.

"Yet," the customer declares, "there are too few."

Too few tongues? Is that what he means?

At last count, there were nearly a hundred million identifiable languages worldwide. Sometimes, in rare moments of self-reflection, Sue Marie sees the irony: She sells a technology, a wondrous marriage of neural machinery and linguistics, that was invented to eliminate human barriers. Yet the barriers remain. Human creativity has kept the world in a tangle, which might just be what humans want.

"Tell," says Mr. Weil. "What tongues do you know?"

She glances at the bestseller shelves. "I just learned *Honesty*." It sounds like *New Reformed American*, except it has embedded algorithms that keep a person within a narrow range of truthfulness. With a weak laugh, she admits, "I don't use it at work."

A polite laugh, then he asks, "Favorites?"

Sue Marie has an older 500 implant, hard to purge but little need to do it. The truth is that she knows just a couple hundred languages, most of them as ordinary as can be.

"No favorites?" the little man presses.

She uses *NRA* more than anything, but it's just a redressed English.

She and a boyfriend loved *Bodytalk*—no verbal component; a language of postures and arm positions—but he had left her for someone younger, more flexible. She hasn't accessed it since.

"Yes?" says Mr. Weil.

"*Broadway*," she offers. Every word is sung, rhymes easy to make.

"What else?"

She tries to find something impressive, her mouth left open, nothing coming to mind.

"I understand," he assures her. Patting her on an arm, he shakes his head and says, "None fulfill."

Is that fair? She doesn't think so.

"Sad," he allows.

Emotions surge, more into anger than sadness. Why does she have to debate these issues with him? It sounds as if he's almost sorry for the millions that he's made in this business.

"Think," he recommends.

About what?

"Where we are going. Can you see?"

She looks outside again, thinking of places she'd rather be.

"I was working," says Mr. Weil, the voice finally beginning to gain velocity. "On sequel to *Cosmology*. Called *Modern Biology*. To allow its users to better appreciate their bodies, their minds."

It sounds pretentious, and she can't begin to see—

"Here."

—any use.

"Take."

In her hand, set inside a cheap plastic ball, is a chip, no designation number to name its contents. "What is this?"

"Keep," says the little man. "A free sample."

She closes her hand, trying to crush the ball and gift.

Then he smiles like a madman, saying the most remarkable, welcome words possible. "Show me your 2001 implants, please."

She gives a start.

"I like you," he says.

Sue Marie doesn't care about his feelings. "Are you interested in a new implant?"

"No," he replies. "But I will buy all of them."

"All of what?"

"Your entire inventory, if that is all right."

She pockets his gift, forgetting it, and slips into *Broadway*, singing to him, "Isn't it a lovely day?"

In the early morning hours, finally home from her celebratory bash with friends, Sue Marie finds the plastic ball in her pocket. Perhaps because she is a little drunk, or perhaps out of curiosity, she unwraps the glass cable fixed to the roof of her mouth, plugging it into the chip and waiting until she is quite sure that nothing has happened.

The chip goes out with the next day's garbage.

A week later, in a lucid dream, she finds herself in an empty store with a faceless customer, him speaking to her in an unfamiliar language. Each word is crystalline, pure. Even after she wakes, Sue Marie can hear that dream voice. Every thought, no matter how trivial, wears this new language. Every word gives balance and a mystical sense of completion, and the world around her, in the course of an evening's sleep, has become simple and obvious, full of a vigorous golden beauty.

She cannot speak with her dream voice.

When she tries, her tongue stiffens. To speak at all, she must concentrate, translating perfection into the vulgar mutterings of *NRA*.

Friends and co-workers notice the external changes, and they waste their worry on Sue Marie, saying to her face, "You need help," and to each other, "She's going insane, or she's already there."

Hardly.

Sue Marie is awash in new talents. Without warning, she finds herself remembering old phone numbers, passwords, and every price paid for groceries since she was twenty. Every old boyfriend returns from deep memory, unaltered by time, and the flaws are obvious, in them and in Sue Marie. Of course her old life was unhappy, an unsentimental wisdom

December 1995

showing her every wrong turn that she's ever taken. Yet she is unbitter, wasting no time on regrets.

More curious than a two-year-old, Sue Marie reads everything that exists on language and human behavior, intuition showing her some glorious possibilities that almost no one suspects. What if each mind has its perfect language, a frictionless grammar and every word setting up a nourishing resonance among neurons? And if there is perfection, can she calculate its dimensions, its colors, then perhaps find some potent means to teach it to others?

Her work engulfs the days and nights. In order to give her an official dismissal, the store manager has to climb into her apartment through an open window, finding her sitting on the living-room floor, drawing shapes on the fingerworn carpeting.

"You look like hell," he assures her. Then he fires her. Then he asks, "Can you even hear me, Sue Marie?"

She hears everything. Days later, she hears a radio in a neighbor's apartment, a newscaster reporting that the Tongues For All Tastes stores have been purchased by a mysterious agency. Of course, she thinks. And she stops working, deciding to shower, eat and dress in presentable clothes. By the time she arrives at the store, its staff has been fired en masse, then given four weeks pay and free language chips. Curt instructions have left Sue Marie as the only local employee. The manager wants to hit her, but she sees the violence in his face, deflecting him with a personal check and a few carefully crafted words.

Trucks arrive two days later. Silent, inspired men remove her entire inventory, plus almost every shelf, then bring in boxes of newly made chips wearing phony designation numbers.

Their last act is to adjust the sign above the front doors.

"A Tongue For All Tastes," Sue Marie reads, in a variety of doomed languages.

Smiling to herself, she strolls inside again.

And between the scattered customers, Sue Marie finishes drawing a map of her soul, then uses the same glorious mathematics to discover what sort of person will suit her as a mate, and how she will know him at a glance. ●





CHRISTMAS MORNING, 2015

by James Patrick Kelly

Folly

Outside a lead sky spits ice and cold rain.
Last night I drank too much Burmese champagne
or maybe Beth's fruit cake gave me ptomaine.
The nog Spock knocked over dried an egg stain.

Holly

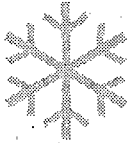
Thank Christ the time has come for reindeer to unrein;
one more *pa-rum pum pum pum* and I'll go insane.
The old ROM of Grandma has begun to complain
that my two other wives are off sunning in Spain.

Jolly

Beth gives me a freezepak, said to contain
a new pterosaur, still in its membrane.
Dad found *the* wok for my catfish lo mein.
Jack sends e-Shakespeare, to teach my homebrain.

Finale

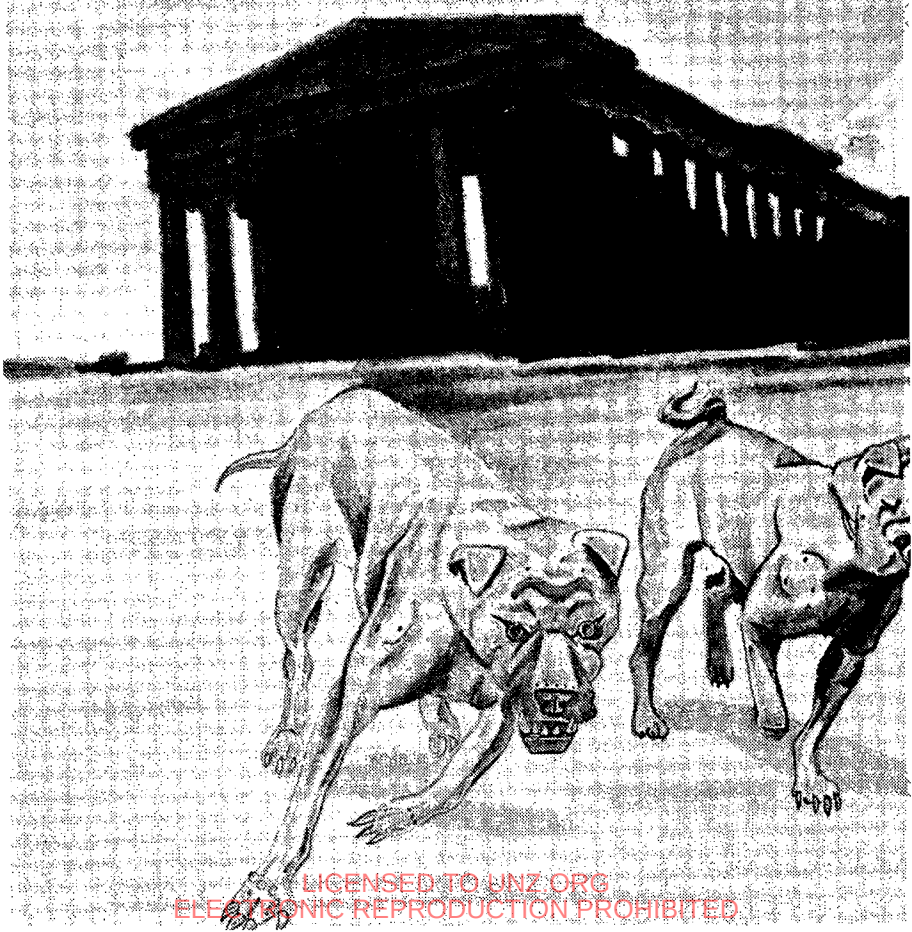
Now that it's over, it's suddenly plain:
too much, much too fast makes Christmas a pain.
Next year I'll relax and try to refrain—
catch a slow dream, be a virgin again.



R. Garcia y Robertson

SEVEN WONDERS

Illustration by Steve Cavallo



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
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"Seven Wonders" brings back Jake Bento—the Time Tours stringer extraordinaire who has appeared in a number of Rod Garcia's earlier Asimov's tales. It also features Sauromata, a teenage horse nomad that Jake picked up in Mesopotamia. The historical background for this story is mostly from Herodotus and Vitruvius. The tale is both a rousing adventure and "an attempt to explore the concept of ancient matriarchy—as contemporaries reported it."



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
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Jake Bento got up before sunrise to bid the pyramids goodbye. He and Johnny Love scaled the traveling boat's wicker deckhouse, balancing on the ridgepole while black-skinned boatmen at the sweeps intoned a morning prayer to Mother Isis. A shaven priest moved among the crew, reaching into the dark river with his dipper, sprinkling each man with sacred Nile water. Milliseconds tumbled silently in Jake's compweb, counting down to dawn—3.002, 3.001, 3.000, 2.999, 2.998. . .

Humming "Here Comes the Sun," in time to microamps in his middle ear, he panned his 3V recorder over the pale line of monuments. Dawn light touched the peaks of the tallest pyramids, descending meter by meter, turning the flat eastern faces into giant blazing-white triangles of Tura limestone—throwing the rays of Holy Ra back toward heaven, while the valley below lay in shadow. A sight worth getting up for. Worth coming centuries to see.

"How the pyramids were *meant* to be seen," Jake decided.

"Do say." J.B. Love leaned against the palm trunk mast, his recorder set on 360, getting the wraparound image. Black and lanky as the loin-clothed boatmen, Love was otherwise light-years out of date, wearing an open flak jacket, baggy paratrooper pants, and an olive-drab tunic with a 101st Airborne "Screaming Eagle" patch on the sleeve. LOVE CHILD was neatly stenciled above the visor of his crash helmet.

Jake was more "in costume"—wearing an Arab *zeira*, belted at the waist, and a Lawrence-of-Arabia burnous. This *was* the fourth century, and he felt somewhat obliged to *blend in*. Not that the near-naked boatmen gave a thin damn. Hauling strangers down the Nile was a pretty timeless occupation; for all the crew cared, Jake could have worn a ball gown and push-up bra.

Dawn prayer was done with. Ra had risen. The helmsman in the high stern lifted his kilt, peeing contentedly into the gold-brown water. It was that kind of morning—bright and lazy, sparkling with promise. Early summer. 350 B.C. First Month of Inundation. Mother Nile was a silvery sheet, filling the valley floor—villages stood atop their *tels*, like islets in the flood. The shallow spoon-shaped hull of the traveling boat rode over sunken fields, right up to the walls of the funerary compounds. The great tombs had been looted millennia ago, but the thirtieth dynasty pharaohs had restored and resealed them, keeping faith with their gods. The current pharaoh was Nectanebo II, last of his line. After him, ancient Egypt would belong to foreigners, and to the ages.

A cassette recorder in Love's pocket softly played Billie Holiday's "Solitude," while Jake did a slow pan taking in the "Bent" pyramid of Seneferu, and the monuments to Amenemhet II, Sesostri III, and Pepi II. Then came the gleaming White Wall of Memphis, crenelated and indent-

ed. He lowered his recorder, "People belittle this last native dynasty, but the Nectanebos did all right by the pyramids. The next thirty centuries aren't nearly so nice. . . ." Religious vandals, tourists, and air pollution lay ahead.

Love nodded. He was no Egyptologist, just a hired gun—but he came from a time and place where black-skinned folks could absolutely bank on not getting their due. North of Memphis was the Saqqara group—Userkaf, Sekhemkhet, the Step Pyramid of Zoser, and the Sacred Bull Cemetery, with its priests' houses, schools, and sanatorium. After that came Abu Sir. Nile crocodiles nosed in their wake.

Sauromata strolled back from the bow. She had been having her dawn meditation—a heart to heart with Mother *Api*, the Scythian Snake Goddess, wedded to Hercules. The divine nuptials were vividly displayed on her *pajamy* pants. An Aryan nomad from the great Sea of Grass, Sauromata was as light as Love was dark, with blue northern eyes and a long plait of white-blonde hair done up like a horse's tail. She wore a tooled leather tunic dyed with berry juice, and a jaunty lynx-skin cap. Jake greeted her in Scyth, "Just in time. Here's Giza."

Love bent down, lending an arm, and Sauromata scrambled atop the deckhouse, pale hair bouncing between her shoulders. Both of Jake's project companions put a studied swagger in their acts, defying convention with a hint of cool deadliness—Sauromata had her *Saca* battle ax and pair of bows, John B. Love had his flak jacket with JOHNNY BE BAD scrawled across the back.

Ahead, on a high plateau at the edge of the desert, stood the Giza group: the Great Pyramid of Cheops, the Sphinx, and the lesser pyramids of Chephren and Mycerinus, ringed by satellite pyramids, mastaba tombs, mortuary temples, and gold-sheathed obelisks—a shining city of the dead, peopled with lizards, priests, embalmers, and beasts of sacrifice. And scaled to colossal proportions. The Great Pyramid alone had two million plus multi-ton stone blocks, aligned along a cosmic axis to within a tenth of a degree. Nothing in the here-and-now compared to it. Stonehenge had barely a hundred-odd stones. The Great Wall of China and the pyramids of Mexico were not yet begun. But the Great Pyramid had already stood for twenty centuries. A wanderer out of space and time—just like Jake.

He shinnied up to the masthead for a final shoot. Earlier expeditions had recorded the first stone courses. Jake himself had caught Nectanebo's ritual rededication—a huge Aida-style procession winding down the Nile by boat, then climbing the sacred way to Chephren's Valley Temple. He had gotten long shots of priests praying before the Stela of Dreams, between the paws of the Sphinx. Now it was time to close the file.

Morning turned to noon, then afternoon. Giza sank beneath the dunes

as Jake's part of the Seven Wonders project headed downriver toward the sea. By nightfall, they were negotiating the Canopic branch, rigging groaning and creaking as the crew took in sail to a centuries-old chant. Parting the curtain to his cabin, Jake found Sauromata sitting by his cot, brushing her gold rope of hair by the light of a tiny oil lamp, a simple indented lump of clay with a wick floating in the tallow. Perhaps it was the play of lamplight, or the prospect of heading out onto Homer's wine-dark sea, but seeing her made him think of goddess shrines, altar fires, and burning cities.

Hanging his burnous on a peg, he took the brush from her hand. "Here, let me do it."

Her jacket hung open. The shining curve of her breast provoked a pang of lust so sharp and sudden he could barely wield the brush. Sauromata must have sensed it. Looking up, she pushed her lower lip into a pout, half-accusing, half-playful. "I hope this is not why you brought me here."

"Hell no," Jake denied the notion vigorously. This teenage horse-nomad with her touchy sense of honor had been hired on as a "native auxiliary," a loyal-pathan-cum-bodyguard. She was perfect for the part, practically a local, born a few years later in the century, and fluent in Greek and Persian—able to quote Homer and Euripides, and a sure hand with a dozen deadly weapons. Devoted to poetry, paganism, horse flesh, and heterosex. But if she thought she had been brought along merely for Jake's amusement, he would be lucky to live out the night.

"This is a fringe benefit." He pulled her head back and kissed her—a semi-dangerous thing to do. Sauromata never let herself be manhandled unless she was in the mood. She must have been, because her mouth opened, taking in his tongue with smooth authority. Jake smelled sour milk, and the perfumes Scyth women rub on their bodies—cypress, cedarwood, and frankincense.

Their lips parted, and she complained, "So far we have toured old tombs, and the thieves' market in Memphis—seeing naught but boatmen's brawls." Sauromata was plainly puzzled why a Magus from the future even cared about such things. "Have you no markets and tombs at home?"

"We shop by 3V and flash-freeze our dead," he told her, "unless we want them for fertilizer." Explaining academic and media interest in the Seven Wonders of an ancient world was as pointless as a lecture on the Wormhole physics that had gotten them here. "I'm sorry Egypt is so peaceful. Trust me, we'll see trouble." All too soon—Jake much preferred the dull safety of the Land of the Pharaohs to the war-torn Aegean, swarming with slavers and pirates. Before coming here they had seen Pheidias' colossal Zeus at Olympia—now it was time to head for Anatolia, finishing up their part of the project. "The Great King is at Gaza," he told her, "set to overthrow Nectanebo. Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Cilicia are

in revolt. And the Greeks are gleefully cutting each other's throats. Is that trouble enough?"

Mollified, Sauromata undid the cord on her *pajamy* pants. Taking that as a good omen, Jake kissed her again, longer and deeper this time. Sauromata managed to shed her jacket and pants, and unbelt his robe, all without breaking the kiss. But once she had him on the cot, she rolled over, rubbing bare buttocks against his groin, imitating the come-hither nicker of a ready mare. Reared among horses, the amazon's sex-education had been seeing mares mounted in the spring. She whinnied as he slid into her from behind, pressing with her hips for a perfect fit. Jake's contraceptive implant kept him from putting her in foal.

Later, Jake lay with her head on his chest, listening to water gurgle past the hull, feeling the alternating warmth and coldness of her breath. Her soft hair in his face smelled of sex and spices. She was asleep and satisfied. He should have been too. Sauromata was young, tough, and casually, almost offhandedly, sexy. Loving too, when she cared to be.

But she was hardly his soulmate. She was not his *anything*. Sauromata was fiercely and angrily *her own*, from an utterly alien time and place. Home—Jake's Home—with its interplanetary culture and faster-than-light gates—was ages away from her great Sea of Grass, with its nomad clans and head-hunting amazons. Like Johnny Love, she was a stranger out of time, bribed with gold, glory, and glimpses of tomorrow. Not someone Jake could speak his thoughts to.

He thought about Peg, his sometime wife. The occasional Mrs. Jake "was" busy organizing a new Mesozoic expedition, without time or energy to waste on ancient wonders. So Jake had gone off alone to fulfill this razzle-dazzle multi-media contract, and help line up academic backing for the big show—dodging dinosaurs in the Uppermost Cretaceous. Peg lived and breathed dinosaurs.

Actually, Peg did not live and breathe anything. The universe did not work that way. Faster-than-light physics made simultaneity a very slippery customer. Once you negotiated an FTL portal, here-and-now was wherever you bobbed up in the time stream. Nothing else existed. No Peg. No Home period. No hyperlight civilization. Mars, his birth world, was a dead husk waiting to be terraformed. And no marriage either. Which made sex with Sauromata something less than adultery. Sitting Bull, the medicine man who married him to Peg, would not even be *born* for over twenty centuries. Sobering thoughts to have lying awake in the Egyptian night.

A mosquito hummed in the darkness. Jake shook off his lonely moping, letting the microamps in his middle ear home in on the hum. Melancholy was an unaffordable luxury. The compweb stretched beneath his scalp computed a location vector and his hand lashed out. The humming stopped. He dared not go stale, not while working virtually alone in a

very disturbed century. He told his compweb to lull him to sleep.

Creeping like a waterbug on her long sweeps, the traveling boat crossed the flooded bottoms entering Lake Mareotis, a seaside swamp infested with hippopotami, river pirates, and poachers who hunted waterfowl with trained cats. They docked at Rhacotis, a customs post perched atop the limestone ridge separating Mareotis from the sea—their first real excursion “in country.” Village Egypt was nothing like the walled city of Memphis and the necropolis of Giza. The Nile heartland was neither dead nor urban. “This is Egypt in the raw,” Jake warned, “try not to be shocked.”

Love smugly holstered his stunner, selecting a Hendrix tape. “After two tours in Nam, a visit to the future, an’ a year in Flint, Michigan—it’ll take some to shock *me*.” Sauromata smiled; she had never been to Flint, or the future, but she knew Egyptians.

Rhacotis’ market street droned with heat and flies, backed by the low jangle of an electric guitar coming from Love’s pocket. It had rained frogs that morning, little baby frogs that hopped about, perpetually underfoot. Jackal-nosed dogs lapped at the brackish puddles, snapping up the tiny amphibians.

Fat market women, sitting on three-legged stools, called out as the Seven Wonders project passed, patting dark heavy thighs. Johnny Love looked questioningly at Jake. Love spoke Pirate’s Greek—the *lingua franca* of the ancient Levant—but the compweb stretched under Jake’s scalp translated a dozen dialects at once, including downriver Egyptian. “They’re inviting you into the shade for a beer and a fuck.”

“No shit?” LOVE CHILD gave his crash helmet a sorry shake, “Tell ’em I appreciate the thought, but it’s damn early for anything but a beer.”

A thin little man in a breechcloth scurried from a palm-frond stall, setting out pots of pale brew. Turning down the Hendrix tape, the Seven Wonders crew took seats at the women’s table. A matron about half Love’s height and twice his weight leaned over, feeling the material of his flak jacket, then fingering the gold stud in his ear, murmuring endearments. Love whispered, “What’s she saying?”

“She thinks you are cute, with your stork’s legs and strange soft armor.”

“Well, thank her. An’ tell her she’s built like a major appliance herself.” Jake switched to Egyptian. The woman laughed merrily, slapping the plank table and making the frogs jump. Jake translated, “I told her you said she had the hips of a pregnant hippo.”

“An’ she *liked* that?” Love looked unbelieving.

“Sure. Here, thunder thighs are sexy. She can wrap her calves around a man, squeeze him dry, and squirt out babies—Egyptians are big on babies. Just ask her husband at home, or her two lovers in the fishing fleet.”

"God damn. Tell her a gentleman don't mess with married women that outweigh him."

Jake shrugged. "They don't care. This is village Egypt. Women run the markets, while their men stay home and weave. Greeks call it 'the land where women pee standing up, and men pee sitting down.'"

"Don't have 'em demonstrate. What about the skinny dude servin' the beer?"

"The bartender? He's gay. Homosexuals help with the marketing and are highly prized."

"Go on," Love scoffed.

"Sure, a mother with a gay son has got a gold mine. He'll do a girl's work, and never leave her for another woman."

Fermented mash floated atop the brew, but Love's would-be paramour showed how she could suck down a whole beer-pot through a hollow reed—promising to do the same for him. "God, what a zoo!" Love laughed nervously. "Folks in Flint will never believe it. Why are they so set on having *me*?" Jake had done all the talking, and gotten nothing better than bored looks, as though they thought he might buy something.

"They think I am a Greek," Jake explained, "or at best an Arab. No Egyptian would kiss a Greek, much less fuck one. Greeks eat cow meat—sacred to Isis. And don't bathe enough. Egyptians wash several times a day, circumcise their men, and eat only bull meat. They won't use a Greek's knife or drinking crock, unless they know it's clean. Egyptians are big on *clean*—they invented the condom. These women won't touch me, but you could have the lot of them."

"An' the skinny guy too?"

"It's up to you."

Love shook his head, "At least they're clean."

They *were* all freshly washed—glossy-black skin stretched over bulging flesh, smelled of nothing but beer. Jake was not nearly so scrubbed, and the scents Sauromata rubbed on her body were no substitute for a bath or two. The women totally ignored the amazon; a thin-hipped, unwashed blonde in drag could hardly be called competition.

Love looked about, "Did we come here just to sip warm beer and set me up with the chorus line from *Fantasia*?"

"Heavens no, we're on *location*," Jake declared, taking long shots with his recorder. "This is the future site of Alexandria, world-capital of the Hellenistic age." Love laughed, but Jake swore it was true. Alexander the Great founded nineteen cities from Africa to India. (With characteristic modesty, he named seventeen for himself, one for his dog, and another for his horse.) But his first and greatest Alexandria would be here.

J.B. Love looked down the sweltering market street, the future Sarapis Boulevard, which was hopping with frogs and paved with sacred cow

patties. Flies whined in the wet heat. "Needs work," he decided. "A whole lot of work."

"I'll show you," Jake tossed down a big Persian drachma to pay for the beer. The women praised him to their gods, saying this generous Greek and his cute friend could come back anytime. Tramping through the plague of frogs, Jake took his companions on an imaginary tour of Canopic Street, the wide avenue that would bisect the city, describing the parks and *palaestrae*, the baths, canals, and floating villas. Jake had seen it all several centuries later when he came to get his Cleopatra interview. (Not surprisingly, the best-loved, and longest-remembered, Greek ruler of Egypt would be a woman.) His compweb reeled off the sites of temple squares, hippodromes, and the Jewish Quarter. Dust puddles marked the future location of the Great Library, a world-class wonder in itself.

At the head of the cow path that would become Argeus Boulevard was the harbor-to-be, dotted with fishing smacks. A twenty-oared trading galley rocked at anchor near the Palace peninsula that Caesar and Cleopatra would defend against an army. The ship's stern-post was topped by a *labrys*, the double-ax standard of Caria. "And there is the final wonder . . ." Jake pointed out a sizable islet, and a string of offshore rocks. Beyond them broke the blue Mediterranean.

Sauromata quoted from Book IV of the *Odyssey*:

*"There is an isle in the open sea before Egypt;
Men call it Pharos . . ."*

(Her father, a kinglet among the Scyths, had abducted Greek pedagogues to ground her in the classics.) Pharos was the future site of the towering Lighthouse of Alexandria, which would mark the entrance to the Grand Harbor—a pillar of smoke by day, and a fiery beacon by night, visible a hundred kilometers off the Egyptian coast.

The Heptastadion, the huge mole connecting Pharos to the mainland, had yet to be built, but a longboat from the merchant galley lay beached on the mica-white sand. The galley had been hired ahead by the Seven Wonders project, to meet them here, then take them on to Halicarnassus, along with her cargo of linen and papyrus.

Her captain—a dark wiry Carian with a game leg—stumped over the beach to greet them. He wore a plain traveling tunic and a wide-brimmed hat, inviting them aboard in a laconic Carian accent, confusing his Greek consonants—saying "Jag" for Jake, and totally mangling "Sauromata." Jake took an instant liking to the old salt, who exuded that leather-skinned competence Jake looked for whenever he was forced to trust his luck to the fickle sea.

Pharos was supposed to harbor nymphs—all Jake saw were seals,

basking on the pebbled beach. The Carians rowed them across, and he scrambled about, taking recordings. But when he was ready to sail, Sauromata refused.

Standing bow in hand, she again quoted Book IV of the *Odyssey*, lecturing Jake on how Helen of Troy and her husband Menelaus had been stranded *on this very spot* for failing to offer up sacrifices. "Poseidon must be appeased. Menelaus had to wait twenty days and wrestle the Old Man of the Sea to get a wind."

The wind was already blowing from the southwest, hot off the Libyan desert. "Perfect for Halicarnassus," Jake pointed out. "Any more of a breeze and we'll have a sirocco on our hands."

The amazon insisted on an offering. She could be ungodly stubborn in the name of religion. And some luckless seal would not do. "It must be a bull calf. Or Poseidon will blow us to Hades and back, like he did Ulysses." She gave Jake that you-don't-honor-our-gods look.

He threw up his hands and gave in, sitting down beside Johnny Love, who produced a chunk of *Kara Khan* from the Memphis thieves' market. Love crumbled part of the black lump into a small stone pipe Jake had picked up at a studio party in twenty-first century Beverly Hills. Right before the Big Quake.

While they lit up, the captain hobbled off to see about getting a bull calf—being a seaman and a Carian, he respected the whims of women and sea gods. Sauromata called after him, "Make sure he has the mark of a scarab on his tongue."

The Carians rowed over to Rhacotis and came back with a calf. Twisted around the young bull's horns was a papyrus band, stamped with a priest's signet ring, declaring him fit for sacrifice—it being a flaying offense to offer the gods an inferior cut of beef. Sauromata had a child's way with animals. Her bull-calf gladly followed her as she gathered driftwood and filled a cauldron from the island's spring. The captain noted in his deadpan accent, "The beast goes consenting." Such trusting cheerfulness just made it harder on Jake. At Home, he was a vegetarian.

The amazon called on blue-haired Poseidon Hippios, Earth Shaker, Father of Storms and *Tsunami*. Most horse-nomads had little use for temples and altars, or earthshaking sea gods—but the Royal Scyths put on airs, copying the ways of people who lived in houses and sailed in boats. She used her bowstring to strangle the startled calf to death.

"Praise the Lord!" whispered Johnny Love, passing the hash pipe. "Your girlfriend's one cool piece. Get on her wrong side, and you're hamburger."

"I try to please her," Jake noted dryly, having long ago learned to take the past *as it was*. Time travel had made him tolerant of a hundred ridiculous religions. But just once he would like to see a Greek god. Or goddess. Or maybe kick the wheels on a flying chariot. To make sure this

was not all some major theological mistake.

The captain puffed easily on Jake's pipe. Being Carian, he already considered women to be the deadly sex. Only when the calf was skinned and boiled, with a portion left for the god, would Sauromata let them board the trading galley—a tightly built example of mortise and tenon construction, with a single mast, a tall curving stern, and a narrow deck-house aft. Crawling out of the anchorage under oars, the captain made for the Canopic Mouth, planning to stand out from the tip of the Delta, aiming for a landfall on Cyprus or the southern coast of Anatolia. A direct course for Halicarnassus was impossible. Rhodes lay smack in their path, busily gearing up for a brawl with Caria that Jake hoped to avoid.

Leaning on the seaward rail, between his two companions, Jake asked Sauromata what she saw.

"Home," she nodded northward. She did not mean it literally. The view to port was all waves and whitecaps. But over that watery horizon, across the Middle Sea and beyond the Bosphorus, the grassy steppes of Eurasia rolled from one end of the world to the other. "Though I am not yet born, my family is out there on the Sea of Grass. My father. My mother, who died at my birth. My brothers, who will be killed by Huns."

Jake gave a guilty start. He was just making talk, but his compweb confirmed the dates. He had brought Sauromata to a world where her dead were living. The teenager's whole life had been shaped by the death of her mother and brothers—making Sauromata both son and daughter. From Caria, she *could* keep heading north, and take a chance at finding the mother she never knew, and the brothers she was brought up to replace.

"You can't go home again." Love said it softly in Greek.

"Why?" The girl gave the airborne trooper a curious look.

"It don't work. I tried. I went back to when my hitch was over and that dog-ass war was done with. I found my mama dead. My little brother grown up and gone away. Tried living with my sister in Flint—but I couldn't hack the bullshit. Guns and gangs. Gettin' cheap service in expensive places. No way. Not after seeing the future."

He turned his back to the rail, talking about the far future as though it were long ago. "Goddamn FBI looked me up. After all the time hearing about the *outstanding* job we did in Nam, and how awfully proud they were to have us back—I am here to tell you they were not one fuckin' bit proud to find *my* black face on the streets of Flint. Not when I was very much MIA in Laos. Folks in Flint could not *find* Laos on a map, but the MPs found *me*. Only they dithered too long deciding on charges. I was sure enough AWOL. But desertion didn't fit, 'cause my unit was well known to have been wiped out. What was I to tell them—that I got snagged by a UFO?"

"How *did* you get out?" Sauromata had been vaguely informed that

Love was recruited from a war zone.

"The Airborne was thrown into this *absolutely* brilliant operation, Lam Son 719. Supposed to be a gook-vs-gook show in Laos, with no grunts involved—not in the ground game anyway. We were the passing attack, flying ARVN into layers of flak—12.7mm, 23mm, 37mm, 57mm, whatever Mr. Charles had handy. And when you were hit, you went fucking *down*—onto the ground, orders or no. Our firebase was overrun, and my chopper went down—with the pilot and door gunner dead. Leaving me goddamn alone, until I heard a whir overhead. Thought it was a Jolly Green Giant coming to get me."

Instead it was a STOP hovership, homing in on a time-slipped expedition out of tenth century Burma that had become badly tangled in a twentieth century war. Love took an active part in the ensuing firefight between Special Temporal Operations and a full battalion from the 308th NVA division. Rather than leaving him for the NVA to find, STOP wafted Love away along with the team from Burma. Jake wondered how much Sauromata understood—hearing it half in Greek and half in English. There were no decent Classical Greek substitutes for words like "gook," "door gunner," or "Jolly Green Giant."

Enough of the flavor came through for her to go wide-eyed, "Wars in the future must be wondrous!"

Love laughed. "Hell no. You'd hate it—fighting a war you couldn't win, in places people claimed didn't exist. Drive you crazy, gal. An' getting some from a huey is awful antiseptic compared to swinging an ax and feeling it go *clunk*. Don't look to see *me* going back." Sauromata saw the disadvantages.

A cry came down from the masthead. Jake's microamps magnified the words and his compweb translated out, "Sails to windward!" He jerked about, seeing a pair of sails standing out from the low green coastline.

The Delta swarmed with coasters—mostly fishing skiffs and cargo barges—but these weren't shrimpers hoping to sell their catch. They had the look of warships. He raised the gain on his corneal lenses, bioimplants augmenting his vision. They were biremes. Rhodian too. He recognized the sun disk and laurel on their bow posts—sacred to Helios-Apollo.

Jake cursed himself for not being at the masthead, where he could have spotted the biremes sooner, giving the galley time to slip hull down over the horizon. Instead he'd been mooning about, listening to stories from orphans out of time. Rhodians were not normally pirates, but Hellas had a rapacious appetite for slaves and plunder. Greek courts had ruled that Nectanebo II was technically in rebellion against the Great King of Persia, and Pharaoh's shipping could be taken as contraband.

The captain dismissed Jake's concern, saying, "They haven't a slug's chance of catching us in a rising sea." He ordered the tiller put over to

gain sea room, and get the south-west wind on their port quarter. The gap-toothed helmsman grinned over his shoulder at the long cranky biremes wallowing in the swells. "Look at 'em, tryin' ta jib a couple of keel-less tubs—cryin' an' gnashing their teeth!" He called out to the biremes in Carian, "Yew rosy-cocked, star-gazing, boy-fucking Greeks! Go weepin' home ta Papa Apollo!" In a downwind stern chase, the deeper-riding galley could easily exhaust the warships' rowers, then disappear at dusk.

Carian taunts turned sour when the wind vanished. As the Delta dipped out of sight, the sirocco died. The galley's huge mainsail boomed and flapped, then hung limp. It was the helmsman's turn to weep and gnash his teeth. Waves magically slackened, and the biremes came skimming over the glassy sea, fast and silent, like a pair of angry scorpions. Crimson oar blades flashed in the sun.

Running was pointless, and would merely leave the galley's oarsmen too tired to defend the ship. Sailors swung the mainyard around, using helmets and leather buckets to douse the great sail with seawater, turning it into a sodden barrier against arrows and fire pots. "So much for bull sacrifices," Jake muttered. If they had set off when he wanted to, the wind would have blown them way past the warships.

Love unshipped his shield from its waterproof case. "You know how yer girl loves a mix-up—she might have slipped in a prayer for Rhodian pirates."

Jake glanced at Sauromata, busy stringing a bow, her face set—she took her prayers too seriously to be anything but honest. "No, we can thank the gods for this. Or dumb chance."

J.B. Love shouldered his shield. "Either way, we got ourselves a pissin' contest with a pair of biremes."

She Who Rends

Striking their masts, the biremes came over the hot oily swell *hemio-lia* style, oar banks three-quarter manned, decks dark with armed men. Sinister painted eyes, half-submerged by bow waves, glared from above the rams, alive with evil intent. Jake's guts went numb, while his comp-web rattled off percentage chances on selected outcomes: maimed, crippled, drowned, or dead. Unenviable choices. Jake hated battles. Even tiny skirmishes fought in backwater centuries where methods of mass destruction were charmingly underdeveloped. He should be working some safe and sane period—he could have been in the Upper Neolithic, attending fertility orgies and teaching the locals to brew beer.

Crash helmet, flak jacket, and iron-bound shield were proof against primitive projectiles—but self defense was not sufficient. Somehow the

crew and passengers had to hold the galley against four times their numbers. Despite a well-publicized knack for poetry and sculpture, Greeks often did ghastly things to prisoners—like cutting off their thumbs or throwing them overboard. Slavery could be the kindest fate awaiting the unwary stranger.

Bending down to buckle his greaves, Jake saw a thick line of breakers boiling up to starboard—as if a virgin reef were surfacing, spreading white water between them and the warships. Incredible. Impossible, actually. His compweb had them in open sea, with a quarter-kilometer of water under the keel. Maybe sacrifices to Poseidon were not just ritual bloodletting. A timely reef, cutting you off from your pursuers, was what you would expect from some friendly sea god.

The biremes bore down on this foam barrier, red oars dipping eagerly, ready to ride right over the reef—but never actually reaching it. The line of breakers kept ahead of the warships, outpacing professional rowers. Jacking up the gain on his lenses, Jake saw the reef separate into hundreds of leaping, splashing gray-black bodies.

A shoal of dolphins was making the blue Mediterranean boil, blowing white plumes of spray. Jake had never seen these playful sea mammals act so frantic—as though something below were spooking them. Sharks perhaps, prowling after the warships in search of an easy meal.

"Let's git some." Love slapped Jake on the back, then loped off to defend the forecastle. Love was lucky. In Laos, he had seen worse. Much worse.

At about arrow range, boarding parties crowded into the sterns of the biremes to raise their bows—the Rhodians did not aim to sink their prize, merely wanting firm contact. Jake took position beside Sauromata atop the deckhouse, covering her with his shield. She had her big distance bow drawn back to the ear, Scythian style. Greeks drew their bows only as far as the chest, and assumed amazons amputated a breast to shoot. A silly notion. Sauromata let fly, sending an arrow humming toward the nearer bireme. She could outshoot any Greek alive, without needing a mastectomy.

Her shaft caught an officer in the throat as he turned to encourage his men. Jake winced. That would only make the Greeks madder. She could empty her whole quiver and hardly reduce the odds against them. Their best hope was to turn them back when they tried to board. He glanced anxiously at the Carians crouched behind the gunwales, clutching their pikes, armed with riphooks and daggers for close-in work. Their captain, still wearing his broad-brimmed hat, braced them with tales of lurid Greek atrocities, finishing with a plea to send the Rhodians home "on their shields." Meaning feet first.

Leaping dolphins parted. Sauromata switched to her lighter, rapid-fire bow—taking her last shot at point-blank range. Jake grabbed the gun-

wale. With an appalling crack, a bireme slammed into the galley's starboard bow. The deckhouse heeled drunkenly to port. Timbers shrieked and splintered as the Rhodian ram rode up on the thick wale at the waterline. Boarders rushed forward behind a wall of shields, bringing down the ram, embedding it in the galley's side, turning it into a bridge.

Johnny Love jumped down from the forecastle to greet them. Crouching behind his big *Boeotian* shield, he aimed his neural stunner under the rim, raking the legs of the Rhodians. The front rank collapsed. A couple hit the ram and bounced overboard, headed straight to the bottom, pulled down by bronze armor and paralyzed limbs. Jake felt bad about that—they had not come over a dozen millennia merely to drown the locals. But such were the perils of piracy.

Sauromata turned her shafts against the second bireme, which aimed to grapple with the galley's stern. Jake rotated with her, assailed by slings and arrows, keeping his shield between them and the enemy. Behind him he heard Carians cry out "Fire!" A horrible shout to hear aboard a wooden ship. Desperate Rhodians were pitching fire onto the forecastle to harry the defenders.

Love would just have to deal with that. Jake had other worries. Sling pellets zipped by his ear with a doppler whine, as Rhodian Davids tried to make his helmet ring. He felt a flood of absurd concern for Sauromata, fighting in only a lynx-skin cap. She was young and strong, able to trounce him at hand-to-hand combat, but he still feared for her. The insane sense of personal invincibility that Jake drew about himself at bleak moments did not extend to Sauromata. He could well picture himself sobbing as he held her stiffening form.

A javelin thudded into Jake's shield, jarring his teeth, and ending any imagining. The threat was instantly here-and-now, without a spare moment left to separate subject from object. Beneath a rain of darts, the second bireme banged into the galley's stern.

Grapples snaked through the air, biting into the deck. Carians slashed at the lines with long-handled scythes, as Rhodian sailors drove daggers into the galley's bulwarks to use as footholds. An ugly mob of Greeks bounded forward behind locked shields, shouting their paeon. Corneal lenses showed Jake bearded faces, some set and glowering, others fearful, or fixed with lunatic grins. The line of spears had big leaf-shaped blades, sharp as cleavers and set to fillet him.

Time to take action. Jake flicked the safety on an anesthetic grenade, lobbing it gently onto the bireme's forecastle. The grenade hit hard, bounced high, and dropped through the open thwarts into the hull, landing among the oarsmen. Goddamn gutter ball.

His second bowl was a strike, skidding across the bireme's forecastle deck to lodge against the low rail, spewing anesthetic gas, laying an invisible barrier between the ships. Boarders crumpled into a comatose pile

in the bows, shields and spears askew, taken out like ten pins.

With a heartfelt hurrah, Carians cut the grapple lines, using their oars to shove the warship off. The bireme made a half-hearted attempt to come about and try again, but Jake could see the first grenade taking effect. Oars slumped or missed stroke as the gas spread through the packed hull, putting rowers to sleep.

Sauromata drew her ax and leaped down from the deckhouse, bounding over the portside oar benches, meaning to help out Johnny Love. Jake dashed after her, shield in hand. Carians huddled in the bilges gave a cheer. Sauromata at full stretch was a stirring sight.

But by the time they got to the blackened forecabin, the fight was over and the fire was out, smothered under wet cloaks and buckets of sand. Wielding heavy bronze axes, the Carians cut the ram free from the shattered bulwarks. The Rhodians backwatered—no longer eager to tackle a ship defended by invisible forces. For fourth century seamen, divine intervention was a daily thing, and this galley clearly had potent gods on her side. Carians yelled insults at the retreating Greeks. Not a sailor on the galley had been scratched, aside from one born fool who had broken a toe by dropping his shield on his foot.

Jake stood drenched with exertion, barely believing the battle was over, that the Rhodians had been beaten back, and all he had to show for it was a bad sweat. Love grinned at him, eyes alight, "God damn, for a moment there it was all happenin' in Cinemascope. *Definitely* number one!" Seeing Sauromata, Love shouted, "Damn, gal, don't tell me that wasn't number one!" He said it in English, but the amazon smiled back.

Leftover adrenaline *did* give the world a "great to be alive" dazzle. Sun and sea sparkled. Even the dolphins looked delighted, leaping and cavorting, turning cartwheels against a lapis sky, a heaven so blue it took Jake's breath away. All he needed now was a wind to carry them to Caria.

Smack in the middle of his adrenal rush, Jake saw a sinister shape break the surface. A gray form slid up out of the glassy sea, dripping foam and scattering the dolphin summer olympics. He stood rooted, without enough nerve left to panic, feeling like he had taken a catapult bolt in the solar plexus. This wasn't a whale, or a magic reef, or some unrecorded sea monster. It was a gray rounded hull, virtually seamless, with a stubby antenna-cum-periscope mounted on top. Water cascaded off the curved deck, glittering in the sun, shot with micro rainbows.

There was a lengthy silence in which Jake could hear wavelets lapping against the galley. Sauromata's eyes narrowed, and she shifted her ax. Love swore softly, "Shit, I purely do *hate* surprises." He glanced over his shield at Jake. "Looks a lot like fourth and long—time to special team 'em. Time to punch S-T-O-P."

Right, put in the first string. Special Temporal Operations backed up

field agents in the more widely traveled periods. But not here. Not now. The Seven Wonders project was too spread out, covering a dozen eras from Old Kingdom Egypt to Hellenistic Ionia and Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon. Portal-to-portal coverage was impossible. Jake was working very much without a net.

The biremes hove to. Far from being beaten, the Rhodians were merely letting their own divine backup have a whack at the galley. A flush hatch cover atop the submarine slid silently aside, leaving a dark yawning gap in the gray hull. From within came the wail of turbines. Love whistled, "Make that fourth and *very* long."

A light VTOL craft rose through the hatchway, hanging for a second like a predatory dragonfly, then taking off over the sea toward them, whipping up circles of spray. Jake did not recognize the make and model, but it was your standard fiery chariot from the future. Contra-rotating jet props cut twin halos above a silver lifting body hull. Carians sank to their knees, howling in terror. Lacking the energy for histrionics, Jake still found this monstrously unfair. Greeks thought the fates were deaf, and all but blind—he could believe it. How could this be happening? Whoever this was had no business being here-and-now. No more than *he* did, anyway.

Sauromata shouted something, but the roar of rotors rose to blank all conversation as the silver VTOL banked sharply, swinging close alongside the galley. Dogs began to fall out. Big ugly dogs with red ears and steel jaws. Jake counted half a dozen huge black mastiffs, with flat disk eyes and paddle-shaped paws, splashing into the sea. They swam furiously toward the galley. In seconds, they were climbing the bulwark on chrome claws.

Carians scrambled for safety. Their lame captain, caught in the front rank, couldn't limp out of the way. Steel jaws closed on his legs, arms, throat, and belly, all pulling at once. He had barely time to shriek before being ripped apart. The hounds tossed red rags of flesh and still-twitching limbs onto the deck beside his broad-brimmed hat. Sickened, Jake watched the Carians throw away their pikes and riphooks. Even Johnny Love lowered his shield—having seen enough lost battles to know when he was beaten. There was only one way to survive what was coming. Jake thumbed back the safety on his stunner.

Sauromata stepped out from behind his shield to face the dogs, raising her Saca ax. Jake shot her. He aimed low, at the base of her unprotected spine. Paralysis was instantaneous, and she went down like a shanghied deckhand.

A nasty trick. But it was that or see her torn apart. Covering her unconscious body with his shield, Jake stripped away her ax, quiver, and dagger—then he went to work on his out-of-period paraphernalia. Crash helmet, flak-jacket, medi-kit, stunner, anesthetic grenades, communica-

tors, all went over the side, along with his precious hash pipe. He even stripped off his belted *zeira* and burnous. Nothing must mark him out. Jake wanted to be just another terrified semi-naked crewman, cowering behind a shield, atop a woman who had obviously swooned.

The VTOL dipped to deck level. Just as Jake was sure the day could not get any more surreal, an arresting woman leaped down onto the bloody deck, looking compact and poised in battle leather and hip boots. Her wild torrent of red hair whirled in the howling propwash. Sea green eyes had an irritated expression, and she carried a long knout-like lash, thick at the butt, whip-thin at the tip—its stubby handle lined with keys and switches.

The VTOL lifted off, and the thunder of rotors faded. With a negligent wave of the lash, the leather-clad sea goddess ordered her hounds back. That alone was enough to have the Carians worshiping her, groveling and prostrating, addressing her as "Scylla"—a goddess name that meant "She who rends."

Down on his knees, Jake felt the thump as a bireme swung back alongside. Rhodians scrambled aboard. This time there was no attempt to stop them. Jake studied the dogs from under his shield rim, his compweb trying to calculate what century such ferocious equipment could come from. Claws and jaws were chrome steel, but their bodies were some sort of duro-plastic, light enough to float.

A Rhodian jerked the shield away. Jake pressed his nose to the deck in a handsome imitation of a cowed and stupefied Carian, as Scylla strode among the prisoners. She started making selections, using her lash on low power. Mobile and electrified, it snaked about, herding her choices into a circle formed by the hounds. Anyone who lagged got a sharp jolt. Seeming to go for the handsome and exotic, she picked out Johnny Love and a couple of Carians. Coming to the unconscious Sauromata, Scylla lifted the amazon's head by her pony tail, stared thoughtfully into the young sleeping face, then ordered a couple of Rhodians to carry her over to the circle of dogs.

Jake was next. Scylla's leather boot tips paused in front of him. Not wanting to give away anything—least of all his name, rank and number—Jake clung to the deckboards, trying to pass as an upcountry hick, too stupid to speak Greek.

Scylla was unconvinced. Her lash curved about to cut him off from the others. "Look up at me," she demanded in Greek.

He neither answered, nor looked up.

She called for one of the Rhodians, and sandaled feet hurried over. The red-maned goddess spoke coolly and evenly to the Greek. "Count slowly. If this man does not look up before you say six, cut his throat."

The gleeful villain started to count at a brisk clip, "*Oino, duo, treis . . .*" There was naught to do but look up.

Scylla's red hair was still wild from the storm of propwash, but her irritated look softened into a knowing grin. "You *do* speak Greek." Green eyes looked him over. "Go with the others," she decided. Jake backed to his feet, shuffling over to take a place within the circle of hounds.

Preliminary interrogation took place aboard the submarine. Jake got a glimpse of digital readouts and a stained auto-galley as they were hustled down to a bare chamber just above the bilges (assuming the hull had an optimal teardrop shape.) On the way, Sauromata was separated from the men. "Pity the poor geek who gets *her*," Love snickered in sotto voce. Scylla was joined by a broad-shouldered, curly bearded *badmash* with dark craggy lines, looking very fit and overdressed in pseudo-Greek armor with plastic zips. His grim gray eyes and hard features put Jake on guard; here was a genuinely deadly sea god who would gladly kill to fix a *faux pas*. Scylla called him Glaucus.

Together they tried to question Love, whose airborne trooper dress and manner were plainly out-of-period. Glaucus frowned over the "Johnny B. Bad" flak jacket, speaking Universal to Scylla as though it were some secret language—"Most probably an African auxiliary from the early post-atomic. When was plastic invented?" Scylla shrugged and chewed her lip, thumbing the cassette recorder and glancing at Jake. Glaucus tried a few words in Swahili.

"Dumb guess, sucker." Love said it in English, further mystifying them.

"That sounded Indo-European," Glaucus declared. He switched to Hindi.

Love gave a loud hoot.

"Try some of the colonial tongues," Scylla suggested. She asked Love in French if he *parlez voused*.

"No can do, Madame Ngu."

"Madame who?" Glaucus glanced quizzically at Scylla. Love led them in hopeless circles, mixing Vietnamese, Motown slang, and jazz argot. Jake professed to know nothing but Carian and pirate's Greek. Eventually the demi-gods gave in, stowing Jake and Love in a separate hold from the Carians. Deciding the cassette player was neither a weapon nor a communicator, Scylla tucked it back in Love's tunic pocket. Then they left their prisoners alone. Not altogether a good sign—they were undoubtedly headed somewhere where more persuasive means were handy.

Love dusted off his flak jacket. "Three-fifty B.C. ain't near as nice as she looked in the brochures."

Jake didn't reply. Interrogation had not ended. Everything done and said between them was bound to be recorded and played back. Computer analyzed. Scylla sounded nine parts certain that Jake was not some luckless Carian swabbie—but he needed to leave her with that single gnaw-

ing grain of doubt. It was all the edge he had. Keep the bastards guessing. At minimum, it meant they might not dispose of him lightly—wanting to know for *sure*. Doubt commanded attention, and created opportunities. They might even *give* something to know who he was and when he came from. He was not about to throw anything saleable away.

Instead he waited, head resting against the hull, microamps listening for the whisper of current, alert to variations in drive and direction. Even as parts of him slept, audio and kinesthetic input flowed into his compweb. For over seven hours, the propellerless drive kept a constant heading; the only shift in current was the slow counter-clockwise rotation of the Eastern Mediterranean. But this blank monotony told Jake a lot. Given their point of departure off Canopus Mouth, his compweb drew an imaginary "farthest out"—a torus of points representing all probable vectors. There was only one quadrant they could be aimed for, north and west, into the Aegean or Central Mediterranean. South or east would have brought them up against land masses or shore currents.

When the first shifts in speed and current came, they were barely noticeable, slowly gaining frequency—which ruled out a landfall at Rhodes, southern Crete, or Anatolia, none of which would require such complex course changes. His compweb had them crossing the Cretan Sea and threading their way through the Cyclades when the propulsion system stopped. Current flow ceased. Nothing. No lap of waves. No feeling of motion. They were resting on the bottom in still waters, or moored at some submerged dock.

Jake was hungrily wishing for some of the roast bull-calf they had left for Poseidon when a good-looking youth came to fetch them—a handsome dark-haired boy with a dreadful Lycian accent, robed like a temple attendant, but with the manners of a house slave. Saying his name was "Milyas," he also named his mother and grandmother according to Lycian custom. He would not say where they were going, but two plasti-steel hounds had come along to enforce the boy's authority.

Emerging from the hull into a dank stone pen, Jake found the submarine docked alongside the humped back of a similar craft. No ear-popping changes in pressure meant the sub pen was at or near the surface. Wet steps led up to a pressure lock. Milyas guided them through the lock into a maze of tunnels. Telling Love to wait in a tiny antechamber, Milyas went on with just Jake and the hounds. Love called out, "So long, Chief—sho' no mercy."

The boy took Jake to a large courtyard flagged with dog's teeth tiles and covered by a transparent dome. Clumps of yellow algae and purple sponges clung to the outer surface of the dome, but the sea beyond was filled with clear morning light. Jake got his first look at the outside world since leaving Egyptian waters. A sunken temple reared above the dome, half buried in sand and sea grass. Octopus grottos and feathery black

coral clung to its sculpted pediment. Dogfish swam in and out of tall doric columns.

The surrounding sea bottom banked up toward an island breaking the silver surface. That island had to be Delos. The mythical "Glaucus" was a sea god, the consort of Scylla. His undersea temple lay off the coast of Delos in the northern Cyclades—right where Jake's dead reckoning placed them. The compweb that guided him through the space-time cyclone at the heart of a temporal anomaly had easily navigated 1,000-odd kilometers inside a sealed hold. At least the *electronic* part of his brain hadn't been making mistakes.

Wine and food were laid out on a low table; figs, pomegranates, honey cake, oysters, and raw octopus. Fresh clothes were draped over a dining couch—an attractive red tunic and tooled leather breeches. Milyas helped him change, making polite conversation, and seeing that Jake's carved porphyry wine cup stayed full. Like many upcountry Carians and Lycians, Milyas confused his Greek consonants and gender, speaking of "Lord Skylla" and "Mistress Glaucus."

When Jake's appetite slackened, Milyas stepped back, lowering his long dark lashes and opening his robe. "If you wish, you may enjoy me as well. My master finds me quite fetching."

Jake sputtered into his wine cup. "Indeed you are," he stammered. Milyas had big dark eyes, curly black hair, slim white hips, and was hung like a little godling. "I'm just not very much in the mood—the fight, the sea voyage, it's been so upsetting. . . ." No sense in insulting the help. His survival might hang on the good opinion of servants.

The boy closed his robe, not the least offended. When Jake downed the last of his oysters and octopus, Milyas indicated the temple entrance, a great propylon gate with yet another pressure lock. Saying, "My master will see you now," he sent Jake through with only the hounds for company. Jake braced himself for a visit with the sea god in his own grotto.

The inner door opened. Jake stepped into a windowless audience chamber floored with alternating flags of rose and white marble, bordered by blue wavelets. Glaucus was nowhere in sight, but Scylla reclined on an ebony couch trimmed with mother-of-pearl, looking properly imperious. The two hounds that came in with Jake joined four more seated about the couch, their chrome claws clicking on the tiled floor.

Milyas had mixed up his sexes again. His loss. Beneath her battle leather, Scylla was all woman—undeniably attractive as goddesses go. Clear classical features showed the fine lines left by biosculpting. But the way her red-eared hounds had ripped the Carian captain apart did not tempt Jake to try cozying up to her on the couch. The thought of chrome jaws closing on his essentials wasn't the least romantic.

"Make yourself comfortable." Scylla waved to indicate an ivory stool with dog's feet facing her couch. She dispensed with Greek, speaking

Universal. Jake did not reply, but acknowledged the gesture by sitting down; there was nothing to be won by acting completely dumb. The marble squares were laid out like a game board. Her couch covered two of them. Six were occupied by the hounds. Jake was acutely aware that he was starting with very little, a single square and a small carved ivory stool.

She studied him with ironical interest, wide-set sea green eyes contrasting sharply with her red mane. "There is no reason to be enemies. We have both come a long way to work among dull savages. Glaucus wants to get right down to business—drugs, EEG, electric prods, whatever it takes to please you. I'd hoped to chat first."

Not so subtle, but to the point. Jake did a little seated salaam, sticking doggedly to Greek. "As Your Worship wishes."

Scylla smiled triumphantly, happy to have him admit he at least understood Universal. Score one for her. "Her Worship wishes to know who you are and what you are doing here."

He could have asked the same of Scylla—but did not have to. She had to be from the bad old days, thousands of years in the future, when the money collapse, AIDS pandemic, and ozone poisoning spawned desperate gangs—some private, some governmental—determined to save the future by plundering the past. The middle post-Atomic had problems that made the Iron Age seem inviting. As backward as the ancient Mediterranean might be, you could at least breath the air and fuck the locals without fear of dying from it. The third millennium A.D. lacked the sophistication and resources to open its own anomalies—but once a portal was opened, it existed in all periods it passed through. Clever souls with the wrong sort of ingenuity learned to tap into them. One of the many ironies of faster-than-light physics was that the portals were *in use* long before they were constructed.

Jake tried to make his own motives sound as bland as possible. "We're here doing pure research. Seeing the Seven Wonders, that sort of thing. Nothing strenuous—but with enough back-up to shut you down, should we need to."

"But you haven't, have you?" Score two for Scylla. His "back-up" was pure bluff. If Jake could count on a team storming in to save him—it *would have happened by now*. With total access to the past, STOP never wasted a nanosecond.

"Maybe because you are about to see the sense in letting us go." He tried to act like he could still call in STOP, *if he had to*.

"Maybe." Scylla bit her lip, looking undecided.

"Then you can get on with your slaving." This gambit was an educated guess. Of all the treasures of the past, humans were the most precious—and the most adaptable to the needs of the future. Time bandits like Glaucus and Scylla gravitated toward slave societies, where the machin-

ery for catching and marketing people was firmly in place.

Her brows drew together, "So you know." Jake shrugged. Delos was a dead giveaway. By Roman times, it would be the greatest slave mart in the ancient world—a place with growth potential. So long as it stayed undisturbed. He could not help thinking how Glaucus and Scylla's operation could most easily be safeguarded by having the Seven Wonders project disappear. Teams *did* vanish. Thanks to portal skips, storms at sea, or just going native. And looking for them afterward was not always profitable. Search teams vanished as well. Followed by their back-ups. Then their back-ups' back-ups. And so on, until some brave soul decided to close the portal and cancel the project. Space-time was big enough to swallow whatever you threw at it.

Despite her dogs and leather, Scylla shifted defensively. "It is hardly slaving. The ones we take are better off, *way* better off." Right. Operation Rescue, run by Mother Mary with a whip. Handsome boys and beautiful girls wafted off to the future, to be body servants to the gods—giving years of grateful service. Or filling black-clinic organ banks. Free of AIDS and other futuristic diseases.

"Look," he told her, "we came to record wonders, not end slavery, stop the Fall of Rome, or cure the cow pox. Past is past." It was not a moral decision. The past could not be changed in any significant way. Ancient slavery was *already* a fact, as immutable as wormhole physics. If Jake tried to end it, *something* would stop him; it would be like stepping off the top of the Sphinx to test the law of gravity.

Scylla rested her hand on her chin, staring intently. "And I am part of that past—right?" Jake nodded slowly. Scylla was very much a part of the wild and reckless past. Her steel hounds and electronic lash were signs of weakness that the future did fine without—on good days, anyway. She bit her lip again. "What's it like? The future, I mean."

Jake laughed. "Life is a lot easier. Half the problems you are grappling with are long gone." He sketched the future of the solar system after the Greenhouse Meltdown and money collapse. No more wars. Earth's ecology restored. Mars and Venus terraformed. Humanity expanding to the stars at hyper-light speed, with comfort and security for all. It sounded great. Some of it was true.

"Shit, I wish someone would take *me* there!" The green-eyed goddess-on-earth sounded like one of her happy slaves.

"Let's dismiss the dogs and talk about it." Jake actually believed that they *could* talk about it. Sure, Scylla grew up in a bad era. But she came from a techno-literate culture, that wasn't wedded to outlandish gods and personal combat. Agreeing to share the fourth century made excellent business sense.

Scylla looked questioningly at her hounds, as if seeing them for the first time. He watched her weigh options, an uncertain goddess, all-pow-

erful but not knowing what she wanted; then she relaxed, like a woman who had thought of a better way.

Smiling, she rose from her couch, motioning him over to the near wall. Still looking at him, she thumbed an old-fashioned fingerprint lock hidden in a fresco. The wall slid aside. "I'm keeping the hounds within call," she warned.

He smiled back, "I wouldn't have it any other way." They were leaving the gaming board damn near even. No dogs. No lash. The next round would be just between the two of them.

Tucked inside the wall was a compact living space, with a digital console and micro-stove. Freeze-dried rations sat stacked beside a floatabed. Jake remembered the raw oysters, realizing that the come-on from Milyas might have been a test. If Milyas was Glaucus' idea of a hot date, Her Worship might well be bored. Seeing no easier way out, Jake was willing to be seduced. Close up, Scylla smelled of sweat and leather.

As he stepped through, a dark arm lashed out, pinning him against the inner wall. Scylla's green eyes went wide, then the door snapped shut between them. Someone shouted, "Damn it, gal, don't *hit* him!" Jake felt a blinding burst of pain, followed by blackness.

He awoke with Love bending over him, wielding a medikit.

His head ached. "I'm truly, truly sorry, man," Love kept repeating. "Really, truly sorry. I *told* her not to hit you."

No longer in Scylla's cozy apartment, he sat propped against a stone passage decorated with rows of plaster scallop shells painted in soft pastels. Sauromata stood glaring at him, looking remarkably fem in a short-cut chiton. Someone had brushed kohl over her eyes and painted her lips a crooked pink. She was holding tight to Milyas, the Lycian boy, and hefting an ornate couch leg that must have matched the dents in Jake's skull. "What happened?"

Love chuckled, nodding at Sauromata. "I *knew* that the geek who got her was going to be sorry! They dolled her up and gave her to some poor Rhodian as a *reward* for a job well done. Right now the sucker's wishing he settled for the El Dorado, or two tickets to Disneyland. She kicked him so hard in the crotch his nuts are giving him sinus congestion—then she came looking for us."

Jake pitied the poor Rhodian, expecting a brisk relaxing rape and getting Sauromata instead. Love tucked the medikit into his tunic pocket. He had come through like an airborne trooper, salvaging his medikit, flak jacket, and cassette player. Only his crash helmet and stunner were missing. Jake's equipment was mostly at the bottom of the Middle Sea.

"On the way, she found Milly-ass here," Love clapped the young Lycian on the shoulder. "He led her to me, and then found you. We grabbed you as soon as we got you apart from the dogs."

Jake inched to his feet. "You know, I *was* handling it."

Love steadied him. "I'll just bet you *was*. And I *told* her not to hit you." His voice dropped, "Look, she's maybe mad about you zapping her back on the galley. She woke up dressed like some Greek Barbie, with a Rhodian pawing through her panties. Pounding him into a pile of shit restored some of her good humor—but I think she expects an apology. Make up to her a little, the gal loves you in her own psychotic way."

"No. I *really* was handling it!" Jake insisted.

Love looked at him for a long moment, then laughed. "Oh, I *see*. You was hoping to get laid." He shook his head, "Sorry 'bout that, Chief—but we are on the job. Remember?"

They set off, with Sauromata in the lead, half dragging Milyas. The boy led them through a warren of passageways beneath the temple. Just as Jake recognized a familiar leaping dolphin frieze, his microamps picked up the clatter of chrome claws on stone. He yelped, "They're coming!"

Rounding a corner, they caromed into a pressure lock. Milyas fumbled with the controls as the first hounds skidded around the bend behind them. Sauromata turned, clutching her couch leg. The lock cycled.

Love shoved Milyas in, then spun about, helping Jake haul Sauromata inside. The lead hound leaped, red ears laid back, claws extended, jaws agape with chrome dental work, looking like a huge enraged hood ornament. Jake threw his shoulder against the lock door. Love lashed out with his foot to kick it closed. A hound hit the far side. Built to float, the plastimetal beast lacked momentum. The lock slammed shut.

In a moment, Milyas had the far door open. Jake burst past him into the sub pen, taking slippery steps two at a time, leaping atop the sub. He had to overpower the sub's programing, breaking through any encryption. Code sequences flashed in his compweb as he merged with the maze of circuitry, searching for entry keys, bypassing security blocks. The sub was designed to baffle the most sophisticated locals, but electronic locks meant to stop Aristotle were not going to hold Jake up. His hyperlight compweb was as much an advance over the sub's defenses as those circuits were over Aristotle's abacus.

The sub's hatch slid back. Jake spun about. The lock was cycling. Love and Sauromata were with him, but Milyas slipped on the wet steps. "Get in," Jake hollered.

Milyas was on his feet when the lock door behind him sprang open. Dogs burst out. The boy squealed in terror. Picturing the Carian captain being torn apart, Jake jumped back down onto the slick wet dock. Seizing Milyas by the back of his robe, he flung him toward the hatch. Love caught the hurtling boy, stuffing him through the hatch. Jake leaped for safety on the sub. The lead hound landed beside him, both of them scrambling for purchase on the sloping deck.

Sauromata swung her couch leg, hitting the hound in the head. The plas-

ti-metal beast spun about, skidding off into the black water. Love grabbed hold of Jake and slung him through the hatch after Milyas. Jake hit hard, fetching up against an interior bulkhead. Love and Sauromata landed on top of him. Telling the hatch to close, he had the sub crash-dive.

Love was hard and heavy, but Sauromata felt soft and warm in Jake's face. He thanked her for clubbing the hound. "I hope you aren't still mad at me for saving your life back aboard the galley?"

She sat up, eyes blazing. "*Saving* me? You left me defenseless. To be assaulted by a scummy Greek, with garlic on his breath and buggery on his brain!" So much for making up. "You treat me like a child," she snorted, "except when we're in bed!"

Guided by his compweb, the sub worked its way out of the dock, into the open sea. Jake searched through the holds, finding their priceless recorders, and Love's crash helmet, but no neural stunners, nor Sauromata's ax or bows, just her lynx-skin cap. There was nothing aboard that rated as a weapon. He called a council in the control cabin. "Where to?"

"Halicarnassus," Sauromata declared.

Love grinned, "Always spoiling for a fight." He looked to Jake, "Word has it the Rhodians and their gods are gonna hit Halicarnassus next."

"It's true," Milyas piped up. "My master, she promised me some cute Carian boys to train. I am exceptionally adept at fellatio," he announced proudly, anxious to sound useful.

"Now how did I know that?" Love smirked. "You know, there is a skinny dude in Egypt who's dying to meet you."

Jake considered. They had their recorders. And Halicarnassus was the next on the Seven Wonders itinerary—after then it was Ephesus. Then Home. Weapons or no, it was his *job* to salvage what he could. Home institutes had not invested time and energy in the project to have him come back with excuses. Glaucus, Scylla, and their merry band of Rhodian slavers would just have to be dealt with—somehow.

He ordered the submarine to surface. Opening the main hatch, Jake saw white-maned swells breaking over the bows. Sea and sky were bright shades of blue. Loading everything useful into the VTOL, they clambered aboard, Jake's compweb taking control of the copter. Milyas looked expectant, as though it were his first flight in a fiery chariot. Sauromata wasn't made to show fear. And this was old times to Love. Jake told the sub to bathe up and sit on the bottom, awaiting a coded signal from him. Turbines whined, jet-tipped blades began to spin, slowly at first, then becoming a blur. They took off into the rising sun. "Halicarnassus, here we come!"

God On a Machine

Skimming over the Aegean, Jake's compweb steered the god-copter

east from Delos, down the line of the Sporades, past islands lying like sandy-green puzzle pieces on the lapis sea. Milyas was excited by the flight—"My Master, she never let me fly!" Sauromata stayed maddeningly aloof, reminding Jake what a moody difficult handful she was. Love played "Ain't Misbehavin'" on his pocket cassette deck.

They could not zoom straight into Halicarnassus harbor without inflicting heart attacks among mobs of worshipers, so Jake made landfall at a minor river mouth on the Carian coast. Scanning the interior, he spotted a prominent hill fort surrounded by pine-black peaks. Closer in, summer brown hills tumbled onto the rocky shore. Dropping quickly out of the noon sun, he set the fiery chariot down on a patch of beach.

One look, and the local fisherfolk vanished. Jake was examining their abandoned boats, nets, and iron forked spears, when a young woman came walking purposefully across the damp sand.

Jake raised the gain on his lenses. The oncoming teenager wore a gold-trimmed chiton, and her hair fell in black ringlets from a silver comb. She had Milyas' clean youthful features and studied grace, acting reserved and courteous. And brave as well. With the Aegean full of pirates and slavers, and Caria on the brink of war, she came walking calmly up to four strangers from out of the sky—protected by nothing but courage, composure, and a quiet sense of place.

Her dark somber eyes downcast, she greeted them in unwavering Carian. "Hail, immortals! I am Anteia, first born daughter of Lady Leto, daughter of Calyce, daughter of Ada . . ." Anteia traced her descent clear back to Queen Artemesia I, addressing her guests as Apollo (Jake), Artemis (Sauromata), and Ares-Onuris (Love), the Egypto-Thracian god of war. She recognized Milyas as a mortal cupbearer, touched by god-head, but essentially a servant. Seeing Anteia carried away by the drama of the moment, Jake let her go with it. She clearly knew what was fitting. And the truth was no less weird, and infinitely more complicated.

She led them to a streambank strewn with tunics, linens, embroidered robes, and ornate bedcovers—some laid out to dry, the rest heaped beside a gaily painted mule cart. Laundry bats and overturned tubs lay where they had fallen. Clapping her hands, Anteia called out in Carian. Women and girls appeared, like wary nymphs and naiads emerging from the greenery.

Anteia told them to catch the mules and fold up the wash, saying that they should be smart about it. Then she turned shyly back to the gods. "Please come speak with my mother, Lady Leto. She is a priestess, cousin to the Queen, and like a goddess herself. The hill folk pray to her, and come to her when anything must be decided." Jake accepted. Their warning was for the Queen, but Anteia's mother seemed to be an excellent place to start.

Gods and cupbearer made themselves comfortable in the cart. Anteia

took up the reins, standing in front like a slim young charioteer. She was plainly an upcountry aristocrat of mixed Greek-Minoan-Carian ancestry. Caria still had that old heroic simplicity—where a self-composed young noblewoman could both talk to gods and drive a wash cart. Anteia snapped the reins and they set out, leaving the flying chariot on the beach. Jake had pocketed the autopilot and communicator, fairly confident no one would harm the god-mobile—or even dare touch it. Anteia's maids trotted alongside, carrying the wash.

The cart path followed the course of the stream, past vineyards, farmsteads, and temple estates. Goatherds and field hands flocked down to gawk—from a safe distance—chattering to each other, then falling silent as they rattled by.

Their destination was the white-walled hill fort overlooking the river gorge, sited to protect the lower valley from cattle raids, and provide a place of refuge from pirates. Anteia's father and brothers met them at the citadel gate, unyoking the mules while servants took in the linens. Aside from gold armlets and a bit of embroidery, Anteia's family dressed barely better than their servants—they were barefoot nobles who wore homespun when their Sunday tunics were in the wash.

Beyond the bronze-bound gate, the steep cart path became a sloping dressed-stone passage, winding past stables into a walled courtyard. Kitchens, workrooms, servants' quarters, and baths lined the rammed earth court. Jake's augmented hearing picked up the click of looms and snatches of gossip, ceasing as they entered—replaced by the low splash of a fountain.

Lady Leto stood to greet them on the sunlit porch of the main hall, as serene as her daughter, her black hair hanging in long serpent tresses. Anteia's father was a blond-bearded Heracles, with three strong sons and the title of Wanax, which he passed on instead of a name, like Pharaoh in Egypt. He was war leader, but Lady Leto bore the name, ran the household, and oversaw the goddess' estates. She was a tall woman, long-boned, dark-skinned, and Cretan. Her heavy sacral robes were clipped at the bodice by a gold clasp of bees kissing. Tattooed snakes twined around her bare arms. Jake saw why the poor folk worshiped her.

Anteia introduced them in Carian—still the sacred tongue—speaking daughter to mother, and novice to priestess; gravely practicing for the day when she would stand in her mother's place, with daughters at her side. Greeting god-knows-who. Alexander, perhaps.

The great hall held a feast of welcome. Eggs, olives, grapes, figs, and parsnips. Servants tossed scented wood on the central hearth, and the Wanax slaughtered a fattened ox before the family altar, while hogs and hounds begged handouts. Anteia washed their hands in a silver basin. Lady Leto herself mixed their wine in a big two-handed krater, serving it in stylish kylix cups.

Gods had it soft, Jake decided, picking at roast kidney, and hearing the bard strum his tortoise-shell lyre, singing of Jake's supposed divine birth and prowess. No one submitted them to ID checks. Nor so much as asked their names. It was improper to wheedle information from important strangers who had not been thoroughly wine and dined. But someone had tipped the harper that hearing the deeds of Apollo, Artemis, and Ares would not be amiss.

It was dusk by the time the feasting and drinking was done. Lady Leto led her guests to the sacred court at the summit of the keep. The citadel keys hung from her girdle, ringing as she walked. On either hand, gorge walls soared overhead, riven by clefts and fissures. Summer twilight hummed with amber light, like honey in wine, and smoke rose into the upper air from a peak sanctuary, where someone invoked a god.

Anteia followed behind her mother, slender feet showing beneath her flounced skirt as she mounted the rough hewn steps. She proudly pointed out the priestess' swing, where her mother sailed out over the dizzying gorge in a sacred trance. Also two moon-shaped dents in a flat slab before the family altar—"Hoof prints left by Pegasus, the flying horse born from drops of Medusa's blood." Jake wondered what it was like, to be born and raised in this tiny fortress, daughter to a demi-goddess, enfolded by myth and mystery.

A trio of red granite shrines overlooked the river. The better sort of retainers were bedding in the great hall—only the immediate family enjoyed private bedrooms. But that was not good enough for the gods. Jake, Love, and Sauromata were lodged in the family shrines. Jake's was dedicated to Lady Leto's namesake, Lat, the Egypto-Palestinian fertility goddess, Queen Mother of the date-palm and the olive. The goddess image stood stiff and formal before a horned altar holding fresh offerings of figs and barley. Doves, the most amorous of birds, cooed in the temple eaves.

Leto unlocked a small robing room that doubled as the temple treasury. Silver caldrons, tall amphoras, and big double axes on pyramidal stands sat stacked in the shadows. Holy robes hung on pegs, smelling of incense. Leto set a lamp and wine jug beside a double couch she herself must have rested on during long rituals. Wishing Jake a pleasant night, she withdrew.

The wine was honeyed and barely watered; her ladyship wanted her gods in a happy mood. Jake sat down on the couch, wishing Sauromata could be with him—but Anteia had taken the amazon into the shrine of Artemis, the maiden goddess of youth and death. Maybe such special treatment would soften her, but Jake doubted it. He had dishonored Sauromata in battle, and somehow had to make amends. But it had been that or see her ripped apart. Hell, if he had it to do over, he would have done it again. (Of course, you never got another chance—time-travel did not work that way.) Being right did not make him any less lonely.

Sometime after midnight, Jake was awakened by the smell of burnt frankincense, accompanied by low chanting in Carian. Microamps compared the sing-song to voice prints in his compweb, and identified Anteia and her mother, making an offering before the goddess. It seemed an odd hour to get religion. Then Leto's key turned in the lock.

Mother and daughter came in, carrying lamps, dressed in freshly washed chitons, thin pearl-white rectangles pinned at the shoulders and bunched at the waist. Linen clung to their curves in the damp summer heat, showing they had nothing on underneath. Plainly, the effect Leto wanted. "My daughter is of the age," Lady Leto announced soberly, bearing down on the last word, so that there was no doubt what age they were discussing. "No girl remains a maiden forever. Since she must begin with some man, why not with a god?"

Why not, indeed? Jake sat dumbfounded, listening to Leto go on about how the children of gods and mortals were destined for greatness. Miletus next door was founded by a son of Apollo. Her own house descended from Europe, a Canaanite princess carried off by Zeus in the form of a snow white bull. Even as she praised the immortals, Leto managed to imply that they could be rutting pigs about the whole business—it was important for a girl's mother to be on hand and see things done right.

Jake was uncomfortably conscious of Anteia, standing in her gauzy shift, eyes downcast, waiting. He had been half in love with her ever since she'd come bravely down the beach. Anteia and Leto represented everything he liked about the fourth century, with their sense of reverence and place, making room for faith and family amid rape, pillage, and slaughter.

He was forced to remind himself that what he was feeling was the wine, plus normal primal desire—both of which needed to be tempered by some small shred of decency. Jake was as degenerate as the next guy, but there was something terribly wrong about this. Not with Anteia. She wasn't too young. In ancient Caria, a woman was a woman when she decided to be one. And it was not as if she lacked parental permission. Leto was practically pushing her onto the couch. He was the one who was wrong.

"Look," he told Leto, "your daughter is wonderful—the most beautiful thing I've seen since coming to Caria." He meant it, and wanted Anteia to hear it before he burst her bubble. "But I am not a god."

Not technically anyway. In some times and places he was *like a god*. To the Lakotas, he was a spirit world messenger, He-Who-Walks-Through-Winters. In twelfth century Cambodia, he was called the Shatterer of Worlds, an avatar of Shiva—but anyone of importance in medieval Cambodia was at least a demi-god.

Leto eyed him evenly, the tattooed snakes on her bare forearms dancing in the lamplight. "Then who are you? And where do you come from?"

A lot hung on his answer. Here was a proud woman and high priestess who had just offered him her first-born daughter. Jake told her the whole story, beginning with his name and planet of origin. "My name is Jake Bento. And I'm from Mars. Not the Latin war god, but the red star that wanders through the Zodiac. It's a world. Like Earth—sort of. Or it will be." God, that sounded hesitant—but whole the concept of terraforming was a definite side issue.

"Why have you come here?" Leto looked justly suspicious.

Excellent question. Trying to explain the Seven Wonders Project and post-Einsteinian physics would unnecessarily muddy the waters. Jake did manage to relate most of what had happened since leaving Egypt. The sea fight. Scylla and Glaucus. His escape from the undersea temple, and the Rhodian plans to descend on Caria. Anteia was wide-eyed. Lady Leto listened intently, less surprised, more judgmental; people brought her wild cases all the time. "And you are not a god?"

"Definitely. Not even a demi-god." Not outside of Cambodia, anyway.

"But you *have* come from heaven to save us from Scylla, Glaucus, and the Rhodians?"

"If I can." It had not been his original intent. None of this was *planned*—but he was in it now, well over his head.

Leto smiled. "You'll do." Anteia giggled. They both tossed off their chitons and climbed aboard the big double couch.

Next morning, Jake floated down to breakfast, where a smiling Anteia served him a posset of cheese, barley, honey, and wine. J.B. Love looked fit and eager, bolting down cold beef from a marble bowl, beaming between bites—"These Carians sure are *friendly* folks!" Jake did not have to ask how Love spent the night.

"Especially the women folk." Love chuckled, "Ain't been so well-treated since I left home."

Jake nodded, "Among the upcountry Carians, women do pretty much as they please." Husbands had to turn a blind eye if they expected to be tolerated.

"And they are *good* to their gods. I've hardly *seen* folks so religious!"

"I'm glad you've taken to the place." Trading smiles with Anteia, Jake thought about the cold night Sauromata must have spent in the Shrine of the Virgin. In a tiny court run by women, anything done in the night was bound to be common knowledge by noon. Sauromata had never been especially jealous, but she was awfully edgy of late.

"Yep." Love chewed happily. "You don't see me missing Flint one little bit. Nor Nam neither!"

Anxious to get going, Jake went back to the beach to move the god-copter. Anteia went with him, handling her first flight with aplomb, helping him set the copter down inside the citadel, right next to the hoof

marks left by Pegasus. Servants in the citadel fell to their knees before the VTOL. But Anteia's self-possession was astounding—it was going to take more than flying through the air and being deflowered by a demi-god to turn her head.

Lady Leto took them to Halicarnassus in the family *pentekonter*, a fast galley built like an oversized racing shell, with fore-and-aft platforms, a central gangway, and a serpent-shaped tail. Goat horns adorned the fore-castle above a lion-headed ram, honoring the Chimera, Caria's mythical protector.

Coming into Halicarnassus by sea was breathtaking. Two towering keeps faced each other across the harbor entrance—the citadel of Salmacis on the mainland, and Mausolus' imposing fortress-palace on the isle of Arconnesus. Beyond them, the white city rose upward: wharves; walls; streets; colonnades; and rooftops climbed tier upon tier, forming a giant tile and marble amphitheater, crowned by the ancient Acropolis and a ring of temples. Squarely in the center of the city, facing out to sea, stood the tomb of Mausolus—the wonder they had come to record.

And the Carians knew they were coming. (Lady Leto had a few goddess tricks up her sleeveless chiton.) As they docked, the sea gate flew open, and a procession emerged to meet them—women, eunuchs, pipers, and cymbalists, along with half the city. Jake, Love, and Sauromata were lifted on sedan chairs with red sheepskin seats and carried through the streets to the Acropolis. People cheered them as they passed, like waves beating on a shore, and Jake got a sweeping view of the city. High walls and a fifteen-meter moat ran from one fortified headland to the other, half-enclosing the main harbor. Beyond the twin fortresses, the sapphire blue Gulf of Cos stretched out over the horizon. Even a god could be impressed.

Which was clearly what Queen Artemesia intended. Mausolus' widow sat on a shaded throne, surrounded by women—young girls, middle-aged matrons, and the aged heads of old Carian families. The high Acropolis echoed with the bellowing of cattle slaughtered on the civic altars, while graceful serving girls and dapper catamites in court tunics laid out a feast of welcome. Jake looked the Queen over with his corneal lenses—and what he saw was not good. Behind her leaden paint and rouged cheeks, Artemesia looked thin and worn. A sick woman. The terminal stages of cancer would be Jake's guess—but he could not be sure without Love's medikit, and access to the patient.

It was Artemesia's younger sister Ada who saw that they were comfortable, making sure that they had the cutest servers, and that the carver gave them the best cuts. A handsome, healthier edition of her older sister, she would one day adopt Alexander the Great as her son. (The young conqueror and sometime demi-god would get down and crawl out from

between her legs—then retake Caria for her. Alexander had a liking for young boys and mature women.) Sauromata sat next to Ada, while Jake and Love were entertained by Idrieus, Artemesia's crafty brother, who doubled as the Great King's satrap, and who politely pumped them for news of Egypt. Jake entertained Idrieus with the story of how a Spartan general had his mercenaries switch arms with the Egyptians, so that the Persians for once fought bravely against Greeks, but fled from the greek-armed Egyptians.

Seeing Idrieus' amusement, Love asked in English, "Which side is laughing boy on? I thought he was the Persian satrap?"

Jake assured him that Idrieus was the Great King's man in Caria, but sufficiently urbane to smirk at Persian defeats.

"And is he the Queen's brother or husband?"

"Most likely both." Jake hadn't worked out the marriage relations, but brother-sister incest was rampant in the royal family.

"You mean these folks are rolling their own?"

"Sure. The royal family has to be inbred. Just like the Pharaohs."

"Go on," Love scoffed.

"You saw how it was in the back country. Households pass from mother to daughter, with each woman picking her husband and warleader. Sons marry into wealth and position, or go 'aroving' to find fame or ignominy on their own. Hereditary kingship can only come through incest. A son has no claim on the family fortune unless he marries his sister."

Love cocked his head toward Idrieus, "But do they, *you* know . . ." The royal family was noticeably short on children.

Jake shrugged, admitting that such marriages might be mere formality. "But look at the tomb Artemesia is finishing for her brother-husband." He nodded toward the huge sepulcher set in the center of this city by the sea. "Just because they're married doesn't necessarily mean they're not in love."

After the feasting, Artemesia gave out gifts to her divine guests. Sauromata got a new ax. A double-bladed *labrys* that had belonged to the Amazon Queen Hippolyta—"Given by Heracles to Queen Omphale of Lydia." Or so the Carians claimed.

Love got Mausolus' own sword, a double-edged triangular man-killer with running stags chased on the blade.

Jake got a belt with a flat jeweled buckle—useful, and impressive, but not in the same league.

Artemesia asked for nothing in return. Not for herself, nor for Caria. Heaven helps those that help themselves was her motto. Halicarnassus certainly had the means. The twin citadels at the harbor entrance would hold out for a year against Alexander. But Alexander had to resort to siege and assault, having neither a fleet, nor help from the future. Rhodes had both. Jake mentioned Love's medikit, and the good it might do her.

The well-fed court drew breath. Jake's microamps heard heartbeats racing, in fear or joy, half the court loving Artemesia, the other half hoping to gain by her death. Ranking women, Greek landowners, Syrian merchants, Persian envoys, mercenary admirals, even serving women and slaves hung on her response.

The widowed Queen's lead-white face softened, giving Jake a haggard death's head smile. "I like my life as it is," she told him.

"Ages ago," she added, "gods mixed freely with mortals. Then, in their all-knowing wisdom, they withdrew—and we were forced to learn to fend for ourselves." The old bat was politely implying that a return to the jolly days when gods came down to earth to fight and fuck was not all to the good. Whatever was killing the Queen had not dulled her wits. "We wish to deal with Rhodes in our own way," she concluded. The *darbar* was over.

Sauromata was enamored with her new ax, but Love considered the interview a bust, having been all set to do good with his medikit. "The old bitch acts like she *wants* to die."

Jake nodded toward the outsized monument to death rearing in the middle of the city. "Maybe she just misses him." Curing Artemesia's cancer was not going to bring back the brother who had been her husband, lover, and mentor.

"Let's hope she don't take Halicarnassus down with her. Not with us aboard."

Jake said that he meant to do something about that. Along with his fellow deities, he was lodged in Mausolus' fortress-palace, a place built in Persian-Minoan fashion, completely covering a walled island at the harbor mouth. Forests of slender columns supported flat roofs and tiny women's apartments, overlooking a secret inner harbor where the Carian fleet sat anchored. There Jake took apart the electronic brain and transmitter from the VTOL, ordering the local smiths to weld a top onto a big copper cauldron, and wind copper pipe into a wide coil. Love looked dubious. "What's all this going to *do*?"

"It's going to give us an equalizer—to let the Carians face the Rhodians on an even footing."

Love snorted. He saw where Jake was headed, and did not half like it. "Fuck your 'even footing.' Give me an *edge*. Once we get our recordings of the tomb, this job is technically done with. I don't mind helping out—folks here have been uncommon good to me. An' hell, I'm a *believer*. Pulled two tours in Nam, and it weren't my fight. But unless you back 'em up, good intentions just get a lot of fine folks killed."

While the royal smiths puzzled over Jake's specifications, he and Love hauled out their recorders, going over Mausolus' resting place in fine detail. Handsome boys followed them about, holding sunshades while they worked. The monumental tomb towered fifty meters over the city center,

which Mausolus had redesigned around it. (He was the sort of despot who would cheerfully rebuild a city to showcase his tomb.) A gigantic marble four-horse chariot driven by Helios-Apollo reared atop the pyramidal roof, supported by a tall Ionic colonnade and a series of friezes by the foremost sculptors of the day—depicting chariot races, and battles between Lapiths and Centaurs, and Greeks and Amazons.

Having known the real thing, Jake was critical of the Amazons, who were wearing chitons and faring badly against men in full armor, looking like brawny Greek housewives in drag, being butchered by angry boyfriends. Nevertheless, the tomb was an awesome pile, impressive not just for its size, but for its blending of motifs and styles—Greek, Persian, Lycian, and Egyptian, Classical and Hellenistic, looking back at the old and ahead at the new. Well worth the trip to Caria—assuming they survived the coming tussle with the Rhodians.

Mausolus himself got mixed reviews. The man this monument was built to house was one of those bold, energetic tyrants who made life miserable at home and abroad. He had emptied towns and villages to turn Halicarnassus into the bustling hub of a mini-empire, expanding Caria's borders at the expense of Athens and Rhodes. Thanks to Mausolus, Halicarnassus had a flourishing hellenized commerce, including a sizeable slave trade, and a ring of vengeful enemies. As far as Jake could see, the fellow's most lasting and constructive act was to drop dead. By dying, Mausolus had given the ancient world one of its wonders, and western languages a new noun—the Mausoleum.

Jake tried making his peace with Sauromata, who was teaching some of the younger ladies-in-waiting to shoot Scythian style. And doing an admirable job of it, from the way they were feathering the man-shaped targets. Getting her alone, Jake asked, "Look, we seem to be near even. I stunned you. You walloped the hell out of me. Why can't we be friends?"

"You insulted me."

"And saved your life."

Sauromata snorted. "Life without honor is worthless. You hide behind your future knowledge and fancy tools—they have robbed you of your bravery."

"What if I told you this time it will be different."

"How different?" She looked like a wary lioness.

"Artemesia wants us just to hold the ring; to keep the Rhodian gods at bay. So I am working on something that will make it an even fight."

"A fair fight? Us against them?"

Jake could feel her softening. "No godly advantages on either side," he swore.

She smiled and kissed him. Which felt way better than a blow on the head. But he could not help thinking that his compweb should be checking him for brain damage.

When his work was done, Love looked it over. The VTOL's auto-pilot and transmitter had been grafted into a neat portable package, sitting on a marble table beneath a flying fish fresco. Next to it was the cauldron, topped with the copper coil, steaming over a hardwood fire. A terra cotta crock stood at the outlet end of the coil. Jake patted the auto-pilot, "I've reprogrammed this to transmit my compweb's ECM programs. It'll jam any signals they send out, grounding their dogs and vehicles, giving the Carians an even chance."

Love nodded appreciatively. "An' the rest of this?" He indicated the coil and cauldron.

Jake took the crock from under the coil outlet. "Try it."

Love sniffed the contents. "Jesus, it's booze!"

"From barley mash, as close as I can get to Scotch without the proper aging."

"You ignorant Martian cracker!" Love gave his head a sorry shake. "Place is set to be raped and pillaged, so you invent *moonshine*?"

"We can't win on wine alone."

"Shit," Love drew out the word into three syllables with an "ee" in the middle, savoring the sheer idiocy of what he was hearing. "Are we havin' the same conversation? Why not invent something the Carians could use—like gunpowder?"

Jake was taken aback, "Whatever for?"

"To blow things *up* with!"

Jake grinned, "A couple of more times through the still, and this stuff'll be twice as explosive. Try some." Love took a suspicious sip. Jake lifted an eyebrow, "What do you think?"

"That you're full of shit—but we damn well *knew* that."

Jake put the crock back under the coil. "I mean about the scotch."

"Wouldn't be bad with milk. But we gotta have somethin' way better than *this*. You aren't *really* a god—remember? Jus' a born-rich fool. One sure thing Charlie taught me, if the other guy is good, I mean *really* good, he ain't out to play games. Or prove a point. All he wants is your spleen on a spit—anyway he can *get* it."

"Don't worry," Jake insisted, "we'll have an edge."

Love shook his head mournfully. "That's exactly what they told us in Laos."

The Rhodian fleet came rowing into Halicarnassus like winning entries in the royal regatta. Jake and Love watched from the sea wall on the Salmacis side of the harbor, the spot most vulnerable to submarine attack. They were forced to be uncomfortably close to the action, since Jake's equalizer worked on line-of-sight—the fourth century lacked geosync stations to bounce signals around. Love's cassette recorder played "Havin' Myself A Time."

Sauromata was further along the harbor wall with her newly trained archers. The outnumbered Carian fleet was nowhere to be seen. Queen Artemesia had shut herself up in the palace, making no attempt to put the city in a state of defense. Women and girls stood at the docks armed with flowers for the invaders, cheering the ships as they docked. Wine vendors' stalls lined the low harbor wall, and a market was set up, selling everything from little terra cotta wheel toys to fighting quail in wicker cages.

Rhodians stormed ashore, sailors swarming off the ships, eager to beat the assault troops to the women. One look, and the women dropped their bouquets and ran. Flute girls, proud matrons, temple prostitutes, even hardbitten dockside whores, sprinted for safety. Sauromata's archers covered them from the flanking battlements. So much for giving peace a chance.

Seeing the harbor gate slammed in their faces, the Rhodians began looting the market stalls, breaking open wine casks, setting what they did not need afire—drunkenness and pyromania being the first signs of a successful sack. The attackers seemed undismayed by the need to get over the harbor wall.

Jake knew why. A gray hull rose up out of the harbor at the base of the seawall. A hatch at the top slid open and steel dogs scrambled out, racing up the seawall with climbing lines trailing from their backs. Glaucus and Scylla emerged behind them. A drunken cheer went up among the Rhodians.

Jake let the metal hounds get almost to the top, then he hoisted up his equalizer, telling his compweb to start jamming. The dogs came to a stop, freezing for a moment at the parapet edge, then losing their grip, tumbling back into the sea. Rhodians groaned. "Got 'em!" Jake cried, admiring the splashes.

"Look again," Love nudged him, nodding toward the sub.

Jake watched in horror as Glaucus set foot on the wall and started to walk up. Scylla did the same, neatly defying gravity, cheered on by the Greeks below. A pair of Rhodians clambered up behind them, hanging from lines about their waists. "God, they've got adhesive boots!"

"Jam 'em," Love suggested.

Jake shook his head. "They're non-electronic."

Love turned down his cassette player and lifted his shield. "So we gotta do it the good ol' fashioned way"—from the tone, Jake could tell Love didn't like it. But there were no other defenders about; this wall section had seemed unassailable by normal means. Jake nodded soberly. "Let's live to regret this." If Scylla and Glaucus were going to be stopped short of the parapet, he and Love would have to do it.

And they almost did. Only Jake was not used to running in full armor on a narrow wall, hardly able to see through his bouncing helmet slit,

with a heavy shield banging against bronze greaves. By the time he got to the threatened bit of wall, Glaucus and Scylla were over the battlements and onto the wall walk. With the pair of Rhodians scrambling behind them. Glaucus turned right, toward the harbor, a Rhodian at his heels.

The second Rhodian turned left, running smack into Jake. Their shields clashed, and the Greek took a stab at him with a long sharp spear. Jake hid behind his shield. He had a spear of his own, but was still wondering what to do with it. Love should have been the one in front. Jake wasn't at his best with edged weapons.

Luckily, he did not have to be. The Rhodian gave an agonized yelp, staggered, then went down on one leg, slipping in his own blood. Jake recognized one of Sauromata's arrows sprouting from behind the man's knee. The amazon sure could shoot. Her shaft had flown better than fifty meters to find a vulnerable spot. Jake leaped over his former opponent, leaving the writhing Rhodian for Love to deal with.

Scylla was a couple of meters farther along the wall walk, fixing a line and grapple to the nearest embrasure. She had neither arms nor armor, just her battle leather. Seeing Jake, she stepped back, startled. They stared at each other.

The line below jerked, scraping the grapple against the stone. Jake grounded his spear, grabbed the grapple and heaved it over the side. There must have been a Rhodian attached to it, because the dangling line gave a scream of dismay. Scylla sank back into an embrasure. Her dogs were washing out with the tide, and she was trapped atop the wall, with no hope of Rhodians coming to their aid.

"Surrender!" Jake said it in Universal. Scylla's green eyes went wide with surprise. Jake realized that with his helmet on she had not recognized him. He raised it, letting her see his face.

Her biosculpted jaw dropped. "You?" Jake felt like the proverbial bad penny, but now at least she knew that she could get decent treatment if she gave up.

The sea goddess did not wait to see what treatment she got, decent or indecent. Vaulting over the battlements, she sprinted briskly down the wall. In the heat of the moment, Jake had forgotten about her adhesive boots. Leaning out the embrasure, he saw her leap down onto the hull of the sub, diving through the hatch. Good riddance. He ordered his compweb to release the sub. She had shown sympathy for him—he could do the same for her.

Jake had also forgotten the second Rhodian. The one who had followed Glaucus. The man must have doubled back, because he slammed into Jake, dealing him a stunning blow. Jake went down, hitting his head hard on the wall walk. The Rhodian landed atop him. Shortening the grip on his spear, the man was instantly inside Jake's guard. Jake fought to

shove him off—but he might as well have tried to move the Mausoleum.

The Rhodian hissed in Jake's face, badly needing a breath mint and emergency orthodontic work, but that was hardly the worst of it. "He's going to stab me," Jake thought. His compweb agreed, giving him an estimated point of entry for the spear, under the cuirass and into the abdomen.

Jake felt a jarring thud as the spear went in. Alarms sounded in his head. The Rhodian leaned on the shaft to drive the point deeper. Pain shot through Jake's midriff—but his compweb blithely insisted he had not been stabbed. Too many blows on the head must have scrambled its circuits.

Blood gushed, blinding him. Fear and bile rose in his throat, threatening to choke Jake, even before the Greek finished gutting him. There was no time for his misspent life to pass before him. All he could think was, "What a ghastly way to go!"

Then the Rhodian slid off him. Jake was jerked to his feet, and he saw LOVE CHILD stenciled on a crash helmet. Love's face was a couple of centimeters from his, yelling, "You all right?"

"Hell, no. I've been stabbed. Real bad." Didn't the idiot see the blood? Love was as bad as his compweb. Didn't they see he was dying?

"Where, man?" Love shook him. "Show me the wound."

"Down here." Jake reached down, grabbing at his belly. He saw the Rhodian lying at his feet. The guy looked in worse shape than he was; a huge gash on the Greek's neck was pumping out bright red blood, making a mess of the wall walk.

Love tossed aside Mausolus' sword and grabbed his medikit. "Show me the wound. Man, show me the wound."

Jake pulled up on his cuirass. "Here."

Love went down on one knee to look. "Shit, your belt buckle's been scratched." It was true, Artemesia's useless gift, the flat ornate belt buckle, had stopped the point. What should have been a death wound was nothing but a healthy bruise. The blood on him was all Rhodian. It was as if the dying Queen *knew* what Jake would need.

Love retrieved his sword, and shoved Jake's fallen spear into his hand. "Look, we got *way* more important stuff to deal with." Glaucus was cornered twenty meters away on the wall walk, facing Sauromata's oncoming archers, his shield in front of him, thinking that the dying Rhodian was guarding his back.

The man was at Jake's mercy, but Jake knew better than to act. Sauromata was taking a shield from a Carian, and had the Amazon Queen's ax in her hand, aiming to meet the sea god in single combat. It was not misplaced sportsmanship that stayed Jake's hand. He hated battles, but he was a firm believer in fighting to win—hitting a guy in the back, then kicking him when he was down, was just sound tactics. Glaucus had

started this fight, and could not complain if it did not come out to his liking. What stayed Jake was the knowledge that if he took this moment away from Sauromata, she would be liable to use Hippolyta's ax on *him*.

"What if he's got a gun?" Love was ever pragmatic.

"Then spear him in the back. Otherwise leave off."

Glaucus waited while Sauromata armed herself. The honorable thing to do. Or maybe he was just winded from the climb and the fight. Jake doubted he was fool enough to underestimate Sauromata. The sea god glanced over the parapet. Scylla and her sub were gone, giving him nowhere to run to. She must have sensed disaster, as soon as she saw Jake. But Glaucus still had his two spears—one in his right hand, the other behind his shield—and the sword in his belt. Sauromata had only her ax.

She showed him her shield, and they began. The narrow wall walk gave no room to maneuver. Sauromata advanced on the balls of her feet, Hippolyta's ax cutting soft circles in the air. Glaucus waited patiently. "He's gonna throw," whispered Love.

"No lie, GI." With two spears in hand, even Jake guessed as much.

Glaucus raised his shield to hide the throw, bringing his hand down so fast, Jake saw only a blur. His compweb cut in, slowing the track, tracing the spear's probable trajectory. The aim was straight and true. Jake calculated his chances of getting Sauromata to a surgical team. If the wound was not instantly fatal, he could get to the VTOL, fly to the Lake Van portal, and alert a STOP team. STOP's ability to wind back the clock meant that surgical team could be at work *before Jake even reached Lake Van*.

But Sauromata too had been waiting for a throw. Flopping back into an embrasure, she let her shield take the blow. The point gouged leather and metal, but did not stick, skidding off to land behind her on the wall walk.

Grabbing the second spear from behind his shield, Glaucus leaped forward. He was on Sauromata before she could recover, forcing her into a crouch, stabbing over her shield at her head, which was protected only by her lynx-skin cap. "Bad mistake," muttered Love, still giving the play-by-play.

It was over in a harrowing instant. Sauromata swung her ax at leg level, catching Glaucus on the inner thigh, just above his greaves. He went down like a hewn pine, bleeding horribly from the femoral artery.

"He should have thrown again, an' gone for the sword," concluded Love. Shaka himself once boasted to Jake about how he broke the spears of his Zulu warriors, saying that when a long spear was turned by a shield, a shorter weapon will win in.

Gripping his leg with both hands, Glaucus tried to hold closed the bruise-purple gash and the pumping artery. Jake bent down and loos-

ened the man's helmet. The wound was way beyond the abilities of Love's medikit—the sort of wound he'd feared that Sauromata would get. The sort Jake thought he *had* gotten.

Glaucus stared up at him, ashen-faced, teeth grating. He pleaded in Universal, "Please do something."

Jake gave his head a short shake. There was nothing he *could* do. A request for help would have gotten only a good laugh from the hardbitten types at STOP. They would come for Sauromata, a Seven Wonders Project contractee—but STOP did not race about space-time saving the lives of "locals." Despite being from the post-Atomic, Glaucus was as much a local as the Rhodians being feathered with arrows at the base of the harbor wall.

"Then you have killed me," Glaucus groaned.

"I guess we have." It was out of Jake's hands. Even if STOP were in the business of ending suffering throughout the ages, there were billions of more deserving cases. Glaucus might as well appeal to the gods.

Jake sank back against the wall, leaving the man to bleed to death in private. He gave the harbor a sidelong glance, jacking up the gain on his corneal lenses. Through the nearest embrasure, he saw the water gate below Mausolus' palace swing open. The Carian fleet burst forth, rowing swiftly across the harbor towards the Rhodian ships, docked at the flower-strewn wharves. Artemesia's triremes grappled with the empty Rhodian galleys, dragging them away from the docks, some taking two hulls at once.

The Rhodians looked up from their looting, seeing their fleet headed for mid-harbor. They were too fuddled to respond—in part because they found the market wine especially heady. Jake had spiked it with alcohol from his still. Heroically drunk and burdened with loot, they were swiftly rounded up by the Carians now that their gods had failed. Love wiped Mausolus' sword clean, "Damn, I don't believe it."

"Don't believe what?" Jake listened to his heart gallop, hardly believing he was in one piece.

"Oh, 'We'll have an edge,' you said. Next I know, I'm pullin' your dumb ass out from under an awfully angry Greek. What a fuckin' sight! I didn't know a Caucasian guy could *get* any whiter!"

"We could have done worse," Jake protested. They *would have* done worse, without Artemesia's dying gifts. Sauromata's ax. Love's deadly sword. Jake's life-saving buckle.

"We have done worse," Love reminded him. "Lots worse—but that's no excuse. Dumb luck's the only reason you're still suckin' ozone."

Dumb luck? Or Artemesia's weird ability to see the future? There were things about 350 B.C. that even time-travel could not explain. "So, I was wrong again," Jake sighed wearily, his throat and shoulders stippled with blood.

"Don't give me no 'wrong again' bullshit. I ain't doing this again. Not unless you invent something useful. Like an M-16. Or maybe a mortar."

They laid Glaucus out on a bier, and Milyas was there weeping his big eyes out. Another of Scylla's happy slaves who had loved his god and master.

Artemesia did not lose a moment. She had the captured ships crewed with Carians, wreathed with victory laurel, and piled with trophies. Then they sailed for Rhodes. The city had a scientifically designed curtain wall, which would turn back Demetrius the Besieger, but Artemesia was past the boom and into the harbor before the Rhodians realized that this was not the fleet returning triumphant. Caught without a fleet and army, and with its port occupied, Rhodes capitulated.

Once again, Artemesia had showed her eerie ability to stay one thought ahead of everyone else. Gaunt and grim, she had herself carried ashore, like a seated Nemesis, or the Dark Goddess Hecate, ordering executions, making sure the chief men of Rhodes joined her and Mausolus in death. Mausoleum sculptors would soon adorn the harbor with two statues—one of Artemesia, and the other of Rhodes, bearing the slave mark. Jake asked Love, "Still think these folks *need* gunpowder?"

Love grimaced. "The notion was not thought-out."

They took recordings of the future location of the Colossus of Rhodes, the huge Statue-of-Liberty-sized monument to Apollo that would one day dominate the harbor. Sauromata looked on, acting impatient. Ready to *be going*. When Jake was done, she asked, "Where next?"

"Ephesus," he told her—ground clearing was already underway for the largest and greatest Artemision, the Temple to Artemis-Diana at Ephesus. The biblical "Diana of the Ephesians," from Acts xix.

"And after Ephesus?" she asked. The Artemision was the last wonder on their list. "What then?"

"Home," Jake suggested hopefully.

"I want to see *my* home," she told him. "Where the North Wind comes from. I want to find my family on the Great Sea of Grass." Jake could sense her saying more than that. She was asking him to help her. To do something *she* needed. Something difficult and dangerous—not for science, not for the future, but for *her*.

Love gave him that don't-look-at-me look. He had already told Sauromata she could never go home again—not even at faster-than-light.

Jake's compweb had a million good reasons for saying "No." They would be on their own—exceeding project authority. Plus putting off his reunion with Peg. Risking not getting back *at all*. And *if* they found these people, they would not be *her* family; they would be doomed strangers that she and Jake could do nothing to save. But Sauromata was not stupid. She knew all that; and still she wanted to go. The girl had enough grace, guts, and confidence to frighten the hell out of most folks.

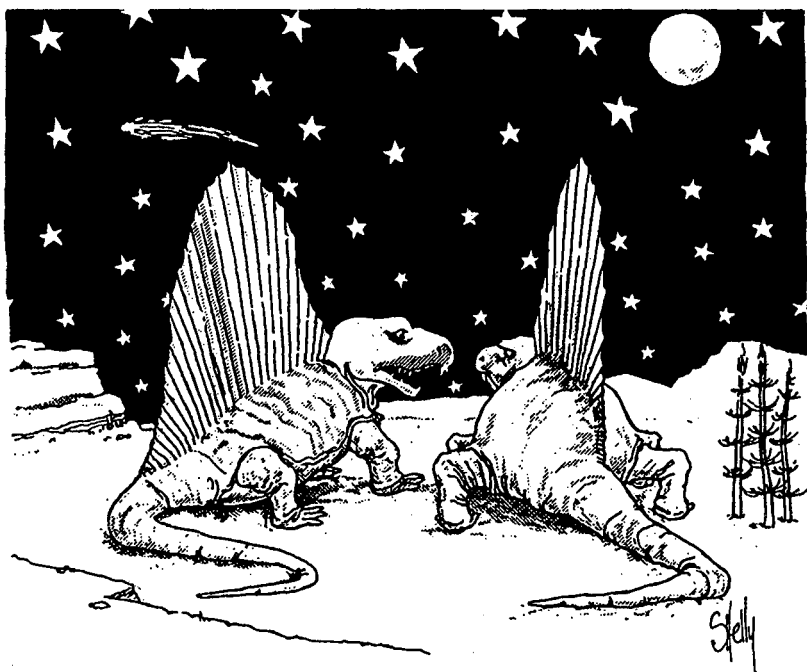
"Sure." Jake gave in gracefully, knowing he was agreeing for all the wrong reasons. The future could wait. Hell, it *had* to wait. That was the way that space-time worked. Rules that would not be made for thousands of years absolutely *begged* to be broken.

Sauromata grabbed him, giving Jake a joyous, heartfelt kiss that nearly blanked his memory banks. He kissed back, but warned her, "Ephesus comes first. We have to complete the project."

She nodded enthusiastically, her grinning face framed by the sparkling harbor, and the gleaming bronze and marble city rising behind its white sea wall. There was a newness about this ancient world, with its cruel lusty gods and its knack for wonders. A naïve boldness that proclaimed that all things were possible. Even the impossible.

"Ephesus first," Jake reminded her. "After that, we can do anything."

Why not? They would have the whole future ahead of them. . . . ●



"Do you believe in life after death, or is fossilization the most we can hope for?"

THE KNIGHTS OF THE BLACK EARTH

by Margaret Weis and Don Perrin
Roc, \$18.95 (hardcover)

What an interesting world we live in. Once upon a time, publishers thought that all science fiction was like this book, and so no science fiction was published in hardcover. Now, here we have this book being published in hardcover, presumably because its publisher is fairly certain of its success in that form. To think that this reversal has come about in a mere fifty years or so is really quite remarkable. You might consider it a reiteration of the lesson that so much of SF seems to teach us: that change, both predictable and unpredictable, is inevitable, and often inadvertently ironic.

What sort of book is he talking about, you're wondering. Why space opera of course, adventures on and between alien worlds, often carried out by a motley, but brilliant band of buddies—one or two of whom will be an exotic alien—commanded by a preternaturally tough, clever and heroic leader whom they would follow to the gates of hell. Remarkable things will be accomplished with limited means—improvisation being more important than a big budget—and elaborate schemes and ruses will be developed instantaneously as

flashes of inspiration. Things may get pretty dire for a while, but in the end, those wearing white space helmets will triumph over those wearing black.

I can enjoy this kind of stuff as much as anyone when it's done well. It can be the best kind of escapist entertainment, especially when there's a dash of originality, a touch of wit, and some attention to the kind of detail that, if ignored, can cause the structure suspending the reader's disbelief to come crashing down.

In this case, it's done moderately well, in a smooth workmanlike fashion, but it's lacking those last three qualities. The authors have learned from their many predecessors and understand the structure they must provide and the plot elements they can use to fill out the structure but, except for their clean prose, they don't seem to have found any way to advance past those predecessors or, indeed, to match the best of them. This novel would have been right at home in the pages of *Planet Stories* (published 1939-1955).

Yet this is a spin-off of the successful *Star of the Guardians* series ("over 1 million copies in print!" the publisher's blurb informs me) and despite my carping, there's obviously an audience for

this sort of thing, so I'd better get more specific.

Mag Force 7 is a mercenary unit led by the human cyborg, Xris, a former government agent who helped the current galactic king attain his throne. Loyal following him are pilot Harry Luck; Jamil Khizr, former Royal Marine, a heavy weapons specialist; Tycho, an alien of the kind known as "chameleons," a superb marksman and financier; Raoul, from the planet Adonia, an expert in chemicals, assassination, and fashion; his partner, the pint-sized alien Tongan known as "the Little One," an empath and telepath who communicates through Raoul; and Dr. Bill Quong, engineer, mechanic, and physician.

Years before, while still in government employ, Xris and his partner Ito were caught in a trap while on a mission. Ito died and Xris survived only by becoming half machine. He had always blamed the third member of their team, Dalin Rowan, for this disaster, though he couldn't understand the motive for betrayal. Now, after years of expensive detective work, he has learned where Rowan is hiding. He organizes a mission to hunt him down. At last Xris will have the answers he wants, and the vengeance he deserves.

Rowan, however, turns out to have changed in an unanticipated way, and Xris finds himself willing to listen to Rowan's side of the story. Then the goal of the mission changes dramatically, when Mag Force 7 accidentally uncovers a

plot to assassinate King Dion Starfire with a secret weapon wielded by the group referred to in the title. Since their previous efforts to get at Rowan have made them outlaws, no one will listen to their warnings, and they must stop the regicide themselves. This requires the boarding of an enemy ship in space to rescue a captured member of the team and then the hijacking of a navy troop carrier so they can prevent the murder. There's plenty of action along the way and the pace rarely flags and I'll leave you to guess the outcome.

If you like this sort of thing, you might be happy with this yarn, but perhaps you'd be happier still if you wait for the less expensive paperback. If you're a fan of the series, or of the authors, perhaps that doesn't matter. As for me, I'm afraid I just can't swallow, even as light entertainment, a book where characters have names like "Dion Starfire" or "Astarte" (she's the queen), where its authors show a complete lack of understanding of basic orbital mechanics (see pages 222, 330-331), or allow a character to tote a "special sniper rifle" for use in the close confines of a spacecraft during a boarding. My disbelief-suspending muscles are well developed, but if you're not going to give me any help, at least don't kick me in the shins!

SAILING BRIGHT ETERNITY

by Gregory Benford

Bantam Spectra, \$22.95 (hardcover)

This is the sixth and final volume in what Benford now calls his

Galactic Center series. Begun way back in 1977 with *In the Ocean of Night*, it continued with *Across the Sea of Suns*, *Great Sky River*, *Tides of Light*, and *Furious Gulf*. (Obviously, this is not the novel to begin with, although probably one need not have read *all* of the previous five to appreciate this book.) Through them all, and again here, the character of Nigel Walmsley provides a thread of continuity across immense gulfs of both space and time. His development as a character in response to the titanic events of which he has been a part is both interesting and convincing. Benford deserves credit for managing the human side of the story so well, while simultaneously working at the vast scale of the galactic core. Just as importantly, he has given us six books of continual adventure and discovery while always keeping their scientific underpinnings firmly in place.

The book begins with a reflective quality, as Walmsley tries to explain his personal history to skeptical Toby, a warrior of the Bishop clan. We soon realize that they are not on a planet but in an artificial sanctuary orbiting the giant black hole at the galaxy's heart. It is constructed of folded space-time (called "esty" from "s-t") and is large enough to contain multitudes: a variety of races and cultures, each living in a separate "lane" in its own way, with only minimal contact with the others.

All are here to be protected against the Mechs, the inimical machine intelligences introduced

in the earlier books who are apparently determined to destroy all biologically based life-forms. However, before they erase us from history, they want something from us, something that Nigel's young friend Toby has a piece of, though he doesn't know it. His father Killeen and grandfather Abraham have pieces as well. Their pursuit is an important element of the plot, although the plot, or rather, the narrative line, is far from being simple or linear. Rather, it is convoluted like the esty itself.

We see Nigel in a role that may remind you of a biblical patriarch as he and his family are forced to travel to the end of time and back. Stop and think for a moment of what sort of book would have such a round trip to eternity as just one of its episodes! In a wonderful set-piece, perhaps my favorite part of the book, we share Toby's adventure as assistant to an exalted river pilot on a craft that simultaneously sails through time and up a river. This in a lane of the esty broadly modeled on Mark Twain's Mississippi—the ships move by induction rather than steam, there are zombies rather than slaves and the worst danger of all is the possibility of a time storm. The enemy is given its due as well. Benford attempts to show us how and what the machines are thinking. In truth, the Mechs should probably be incomprehensible, but that would have worn thin over six books. Instead, Benford gives them a satisfying detachment from human concerns and ways of think-

ing—reminiscent of Wells's Martians—that can be quite chilling at times. Walmsley's response, when forced to talk to them, is to make jokes at their expense—a convincingly anthropoid reaction.

Overall, I enjoyed this, but I wasn't moved as deeply as I was by some of the earlier books in the series. There's some of the same galactic grandeur here in the pictures Benford paints of the core region, yet I didn't respond in the same way; awe and wonder were at a lower level. Perhaps I'm jaded, or perhaps there's a natural limit on how many times one writer can expect to successfully evoke these marvelous places we will never actually see. Some of the ability to do so the first couple of times depends on freshness, and that can't be recaptured so late in the game, by any writer, by definition. The fresh idea here, the *esty*, is quite wonderful for being both magical and based on *avant garde* physics, but it's also harder to clearly picture in your mind's eye than streams of stellar fire cutting across the void.

Yet there is much to appreciate here and much to enjoy. There's a satisfying suitably symphonic quality to the way the novel builds and rolls and mounts to its, and the series's, conclusion. As at the end of any great symphony, one can only stand and applaud.

HOW TO SAVE THE WORLD

Edited by Charles Sheffield

Tor, \$23.95 (hardcover)

I love the idea behind this anthology. As Sheffield points out in

his introduction, if friendly aliens came along to help us with our global problems, we might find that their ability to help us was based less on superior intelligence and more on their objectivity. Lacking aliens, Sheffield suggests that we make do with the next best thing, humans who are close observers of our species, which is precisely what writers are. He goes on to say, "... it is a widely-held opinion (at least among science fiction writers, if not the rest of the world) that sf writers are smarter than all other people. Unfortunately, or some would say fortunately, science fiction writers are seldom given a chance to prove that fact. This book is one of the rare exceptions." Yes, I love the idea of this anthology. Unfortunately, Sheffield seems to have had a hard time finding stories to fulfill it. So much for SF writers being smarter. Even if we put aside any expectation of serious problem solving and settle merely for entertainment, there are only five or six out of the thirteen that really do the job.

Let's work our way up. At the bottom of the heap, we find "Buyer's Remorse" by Kathe Koja and Barry Malzberg, two writers whom I normally admire. The story has a very specific style and very carefully controlled prose. I suspect it does just what its authors wanted. However, I didn't get a clue as to what that might be. Certainly I can't find a connection to the anthology's theme. I hate to admit that a story could baffle me, but this one does. Just barely above it,

because at least it's comprehensible, is "The South Los Angeles Broadcast System" by Larry Niven, a writer you can usually rely on. More of a vignette that comments on the riot in that neighborhood (after the Rodney King verdict) than a real story, it offers no perceptible SF content and only a faint connection to saving the world. It would seem to be here mostly to get Larry Niven's name on the contents page.

There are three stories at the next level. Mary Turzillo's "The Guatemala Cure" proposes that men are at the root of humanity's problems, an argument I find more plausible than some, but presents its ideas so patly, and stacks the deck so transparently—one of the two main characters has just been raped—that it fails to generate any power. "Souls on Ice" by Arlan Andrews doesn't tell us how to save the world, but suggests that one of the answers, the cryogenic storage of millions of people, could lead to even worse problems. Sorry, I didn't buy the premise or the characters' solution to it. Doug Beason's "Defense Conversion" starts out to make a case for the value of technology developed for military purposes that can now be put to peaceful uses—yup, makes sense, although I doubt it will save the world—and ends up as an *Analog*-style technical puzzle story with too obvious a solution.

At the next level up, Nick Pollotta's "Raw Terra" has some real charm, even beyond its aptly punning title, but it tries too hard for a

kind of cartoony slapstick effect without quite knowing how to do it. Still, its solution to water pollution is reasonable, and the story's unexpected side-effect of clean water is both clever and suitably silly. "The Product of Extremes" by Brenda Clough likewise suffers from straining. This satire starts out well with an answer to racism, but the overall effect is hurt by a punch line that's forced rather than funny. "The Meeting of the Secret World Masters" by Geoffrey Landis is on the cusp between this middle group of stories and my favorite five. This story's opening section was previously published in *F&SF*. It's the tale of a group of biologists who take it upon themselves to use modified viruses to save the world. Both their methods and the effects are believable, but the story needs more detail and depth to develop its maximum impact—in other words, further expansion.

Finally, in the order in which they appear in the book, the best stories here. James P. Hogan's "Zap Thy Neighbor" is the anthology's upbeat opener. It asks the question: If everyone held the power of life and death over everyone else, would people be more polite to each other? What do you think? But it's not that simple. "Choice" by Lawrence Watt-Evans suffers for being more a lecture than a story, but makes up for it with the sheer power of truth. Imagine how a culture can be changed by getting what it claims it wants. What if that culture has always valued

baby boys over baby girls?

"The Invasion of Space" by James Kirkwood (a pseudonym) suggests how space exploration might be repopularized by the efforts of a group of writers (some of whom are familiar figures transparently disguised). It's wish-fulfillment, but well done. Jerry Olton's "My Soul to Keep" is a genuinely amusing spoof of religion that might upset a fundamentalist. It proposes that religion is a curable neurological disorder and then examines what happens when a very much *uncured* Pope decides to vacation at Yellowstone. Samuel Butler would appreciate this one.

As it happens, the last story in the book is also my favorite. "Higher Education" by Jerry Pournelle and Charles Sheffield examines the real problem of our increasingly debased educational system and makes a convincing case for a classic solution combining discipline, relevance, student responsibility, and hard work. It makes these points more strongly by demonstrating them in space. Heinlein would have liked the ideas in this story; indeed, he could have written this story himself.

1945

by Newt Gingrich and William R. Forstchen
Baen Books, \$24.00 (hardcover)

Once again, alternate history returns to my column, this time in the form of a book that will be getting somewhat wider attention than most of those I review. Let me not keep you in suspense. The

Speaker of the House and his collaborator have produced a solid book, one that will be enjoyed by those interested in what-if stories, and one that compares well to the other WWII alternate history currently being published, the *Worldwar* series by Harry Turtledove. As you might expect given Gingrich's professional background before entering politics, this book meets the primary challenge of any alternate history very well. The historical divergence is well-chosen and very plausibly developed. From that point, the plot evolves quite organically.

By late 1945, Germany is consolidating its conquests in Europe, including the western part of the Soviet Union, and the U.S. has been victorious in the Pacific. Things have worked out this way because just before Pearl Harbor, Hitler was injured in a plane crash. While he recuperated, his stand-ins chose not to declare war on the U.S., and later decided on a strategic retreat on the Eastern Front that allowed German forces to regroup and eventually defeat the Soviets. Great Britain, having agreed to an armistice in 1943, after the Churchill government collapsed, tenuously, stubbornly hangs on outside the Nazi sway, but is potentially still very much at Hitler's mercy. Both the Americans and the Germans are working on the A-bomb and President Harrison's Chief of Staff is a fool who is leaking American secrets to a sexy Nazi spy.

The Nazis know that the balance

of power will shift against them if America gets the bomb first. They develop an audacious plan to delay the American program. The man responsible will be commando extraordinary Colonel Otto Skorzeny. (An actual historical person, Skorzeny was the ubermensch of Nazi propaganda posters brought to life. His real exploits read like fiction, so he's right at home here.) Trying to stop him will be Lt. Commander Jim Martel, a patriotic naval aviator (twenty-three air-combat kills in the Pacific and the Navy Cross) and theorist. Martel has an anti-Nazi cousin who is highly placed in German military intelligence, so given his own part-German heritage he's considered a natural for assignment to Berlin. There, he unjustly falls under official suspicion. Even after being cleared, he has a hard time getting his superiors to take his warnings seriously. While Skorzeny schemes and trains his men, Jim is stuck in a dead-end assignment deep in the Pentagon. To say much more would be to violate security myself.

There's plenty of action, lots of nicely worked out historical detail and use of historical characters (Churchill, Marshall, and Donovan, among others), excellent attention to the progress of Nazi high technology (the Me-264E, a stretched bomber larger than a B-29 and powered by a mix of props and jets, Gotha flying wings, TV-guided missiles), and despite the opening scene that got so much attention in the press a few months back, no sex to speak of. In case

you're wondering, the Speaker's personal politics seem to surface overtly only once, in a sequence that shows the virtue of citizen-owned firearms when militia action becomes necessary.

Considering the books sometimes produced by celebrities and collaborators (Shatner's come to mind), Gingrich and Forstchen can take pride in 1945. Perhaps the difference this time is that Gingrich really does read SF and really does care about history. I enjoyed this, and perhaps my only annoyance was the discovery that, as with Turtledove's WWII book, this one is "to be continued."

THE MAGNIFICENT WILF

by Gordon R. Dickson

Baen Books, \$21.00 (hardcover)

After the aliens came, Earth was forced to get its act together and create the Secretariat for Alien Affairs. Tom Parent works there as an under-appreciated Assistant Third Secretary. His luck and his life begin to change when he and his wife Lucy and their Great Dane Rex are chosen, despite Tom's boss's machinations to the contrary, to host the first overnight domestic visit by an Oprinkian, a member of the race who are our sponsors for galactic citizenship. Tom's guest's name is Mr. Rejilla, and he's a very high-ranking Oprinkian at that, the highest ever to come to Earth. Rex was important because Mr. Rejilla had requested that his hosts have a pet. He seemed to spend as much time talking to Rex as to Lucy and Tom.

The visit goes well, and leaves Rex with the ability to project his still very doggish thoughts. Tom and Lucy feel better about this when they realize that only they can hear him.

More importantly, based on Mr. Rejilla's report, Tom is promoted and given a new job and special training familiarizing him with galactic languages and cultures. Unfortunately, Lucy cannot be similarly briefed, though she is to be his partner and co-ambassador. Their new job soon leads them, and Rex, out into the galaxy. There they struggle to learn about the many kinds of aliens while doing their best to raise the status of the human race to where it will be eligible for membership on the Sector Council. Along the way, Tom becomes an Apprentice Assassin, Lucy is taken for a wife, and the two of them will accidentally win an empire and quite deliberately stop a war. Unfortunately, this has negative financial consequences for Earth, making them most unpopular back home. They can't spend too much time worrying about that, however, for the real challenge is still ahead, an invasion from outside the galaxy. Who knows, maybe if they can prevent it, the folks back on Earth will let them come home!

The publisher is comparing this to Dickson's classic fantasy comedy *The Dragon and the George*. I can see why they'd say that; this is also a light entertainment that plays with genre conventions, albeit those of SF rather than fantasy,

but I wouldn't push the comparison too far. It's been some time since I read it, but I don't remember *D. & the G.* being quite this fluffy or quite this broad. This book has the feel of being something Dickson might have written with one hand tied behind his back. Still, it's diverting in its screwball way, and laugh-out-loud funny a few times once it's off and running—perfect for reading on the beach or while lying in a hammock on a hot and lazy late-summer afternoon. It would also make a good Disney comedy, in the mode of *The Absent Minded Professor* or *The Shaggy Dog*. However, I think I'd rather have a Disney version of *The Dragon and the George* first.

FEERSUM ENDJINN

by Iain M. Banks

Bantam Spectra, \$12.95 (trade paperback)

I've mentioned before how in my years of military-editing exile I'd fallen out of touch with all the hot new writers of my home genre, and how I hoped this column would help me to catch up. One of the writers high on my list to that end was Iain M. Banks, so I was pleased when this book turned up in the mail, and delighted when it turned out that Mr. Banks lives up to his reputation. *Feersum Endjinn* is an exciting, challenging book. It leaves you feeling invigorated, as you might on a hot day after a bracing swim in the sea.

It's not an easy read, especially at the start, when the rather original setting is quite disorienting. Then there's the character Bascule

who writes in a phonetic style reminiscent of *Riddley Walker*—my sympathies to the typesetter and the proofreader. For example, Bascule quotes a friend saying: "... der wer 1nce jiants. Not jiantz in di sens dat dey wer fizikly bigir dan us, but bigir in der powrs & abiltys & ambishins; bigir dan us in der moral curidge." Please don't be put off, only some of the book is written this way, and you do get used to it.

The place is Earth, the time is somewhere fairly far in the future—our own epoch is referred to as part of the middle ages—and most of humanity has left Earth for the stars. Those who've stayed behind live well enough for the most part—though society still has its strata—and live fully. For they have eight corporeal lives and then eight more virtual lives inside the immense Cryptosphere (the "Crypt"), in which reside not only electronic "souls" but a jumbled collection of all of the knowledge of mankind. Bascule works as a teller, one whose task it is to mentally dive into the Crypt, accepting or delivering messages or helping lost souls. In a literal classic sense he's an angel, if a scruffy one, a messenger to another realm; metaphorical-

ly, as his name suggests, he's a bridge between two worlds. When Bascule's friend, Ergates the talking ant, suddenly disappears, Bascule undertakes a series of dangerous descents into the Crypt and is soon involved in events far above his usual station.

There are others likewise caught up, among them Count Alandre Sessine, who finds he has deadly enemies he never suspected, enemies trying to send him on a tour of the Cryptosphere earlier than he'd planned. Another is a beautiful, mysterious, amnesiac woman who appears nude in the garden of Pieter Velteseri's estate. Eventually, she names herself Asura, and as you might expect, she will play a key role in determining Earth's future. Oh, did I forget to mention? There's a dust cloud approaching the solar system that will, at the least, cause a new ice age, and at the worst, trigger Earth's total destruction.

It would be unfair to say any more. Part of the fun here is peeling back the layers of novelty and confusion to find the surprise within. You won't understand everything until the very last page. ●



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NEXT ISSUE

MID-DECEMBER COVER STORY

In recent years, Los Angeles has suffered through disastrous fires, landslides, earthquakes, and riots, but, as multiple Hugo and Nebula-winner **Robert Silverberg** shows us next month in "Hot Times in Magma City," the poor old town hasn't seen anything yet. . . . This one is fast-paced, inventive, suspenseful, compassionate, and literally pyrotechnic, a major work by one of our best-known and most renowned writers—don't miss it!

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Hugo and Nebula-winner **Mike Resnick** joins forces with **Susan Schwartz** (making her *Asimov's* debut) in a poignant and bittersweet story that shows us how sometimes a very new and very deadly problem calls for the very oldest of solutions, in the moving "Bibi"; Hugo-winner **John Brunner** takes us to Ancient China for a strange and evocative encounter with the Unknown, in "All Under Heaven"; and World Fantasy Award-winner **Tanith Lee** shows us how life can change in the oddest and most magical of ways if you look at it through a "Tiger-I."

EXCITING NEW WRITERS

Daniel Marcus sweeps us away to the outermost reaches of the Solar System for an engrossing meditation on love, death, and identity, in "Ex Vitro"; and **John G. McDaid** makes one of the oddest *Asimov's* debuts in some time, with a wry and witty story featuring one of the strangest protagonists you're ever likely to meet, in "Jigoku no Mokushiroku (The Symbolic Revelation of the Apocalypse)."

UNIQUE REVELATIONS

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections," the "On Books" column, poems, cartoons, letters, and an array of other columns and features. Look for our Mid-December issue on sale on your newsstands on November 7, 1995.

COMING SOON

Connie Willis, Lucius Shepard, Walter Jon Williams, Joanna Russ, Brian W. Aldiss, Michael Bishop, Robert Reed, Geoffrey A. Landis, Mary Rosenblum, Jack McDevitt, Charles L. Harness, Rebecca Ore, Ben Bova, Phillip C. Jennings, Tom Purdom, and many more.

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OCTOBER 1995

13-15—**NecronomiCon**. For info, write: **Box 2076, Riverview FL 33569**. Or phone: **(813) 677-6347** (10 A.M. to 10 P.M., not collect). Con will be held in: Tampa FL (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Westshore Hotel. Guests will include: Ben Bova, Terry Pratchett, Richard Lee Byers, Scott Ciencin.

13-15—**InCon**. (509) 326-3810. Spokane WA. George R. R. Martin, William R. Warren. Had 400 last year.

13-15—**CovenCon**. (800) 985-4003. Airport Holiday Inn, Kansas City MO. Everett McGill. Horror meet.

13-15—**ConFurence East**. (216) 285-2207. Holiday Inn Jetport, Elizabeth NJ. S. A. Swann, V. Wyman. Furies.

13-15—**ReinConation**. (612) 333-7533 or 824-5559 or 827-3118. Minneapolis MN. Judith Merrill, Andy Hooper.

13-15—**Midwest Space Development Conference**. (216) 826-0330. Harvey IL. Small meet for pro-space activists.

20-22—**Trek or Treat**. La Quinta Inn and Convention Center, San Angelo TX. Early Halloween party.

27-29—**World Fantasy Convention**, **Box 19909, Baltimore MD 21211**. (410) 889-4080. Marriott Downtown. T. Bisson.

27-29—**Ohio Valley Filk Fest**, **Box 20125, Columbus OH 43220**. (614) 851-0936. Clarion. S. MacDonald, Alexander.

27-29—**ConCinnity**, **72-26076 Robertson Rd., Nepean ON K2H 5Y8**. (613) 831-7129. Comfort Inn, Kanata/Ottawa ON.

27-29—**EclectiCon**, **9-11 Ayres Ct., Bayonne NJ 07002**. Ramada, Rts. 1 & 9, Newark NJ. Media fandom/fanzines.

27-29—**Primedia**, **22 Tinder Cres. #114, Toronto ON M4A 1L6**. (904) 820-3844. Ramada Wilson Av. For media fans.

27-29—**ConRad**, **Box 31892, Seattle WA 98103**. (206) 745-2700. Universal Hilton, Los Angeles CA. For media fans.

27-29—**Anime Weekend**, **Box 13544, Atlanta GA 30324**. (414) 936-9971. The Castlegate. V. Simmons. Japanimation.

27-29—**Somewhere in Time**, **Box 1556, Covina CA 91722**. (818) 910-1203. Grand, Mackinac MI. Fans of the film.

27-29—**Dimension Next Door**, % 1164 Rts. 5 & 20, **Waterloo NY 13165**. Springfield VA. Live-action role game.

28-29—**Creature Feature**, **Box 461, Cary NC 27512**. (919) 851-7394. Civic Center, Raleigh NC. Films and media.

NOVEMBER 1995

3-5—**ConSanguinity**, **Box 4951, Naperville IL 60567**. (708) 961-0056. Hyatt, Lisle/Chicago IL. Saberhagen, O'Barr.

3-5—**ConStellation**, **Box 4857, Huntsville, AL 35815**. (205) 883-4493 or 464-6665. R. Shelly, R. Thompson, R. Castle.

3-5—**Ditto**, **Box 75684, Seattle WA 98125**. (206) 524-1206. Mayflower Park Hotel. For traditional fanzine fans.

3-5—**WishCon**, **500 Monroe Tpk., Monroe CT 06488**. (203) 459-0413. Sheraton, Springfield MA. Star Trek/Dr. Who.

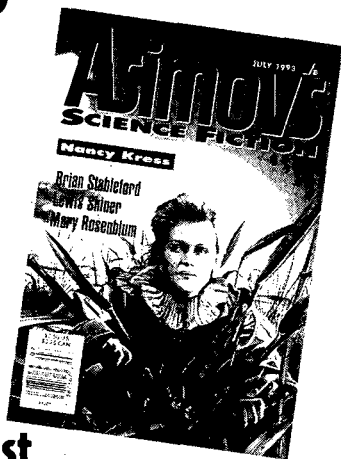
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